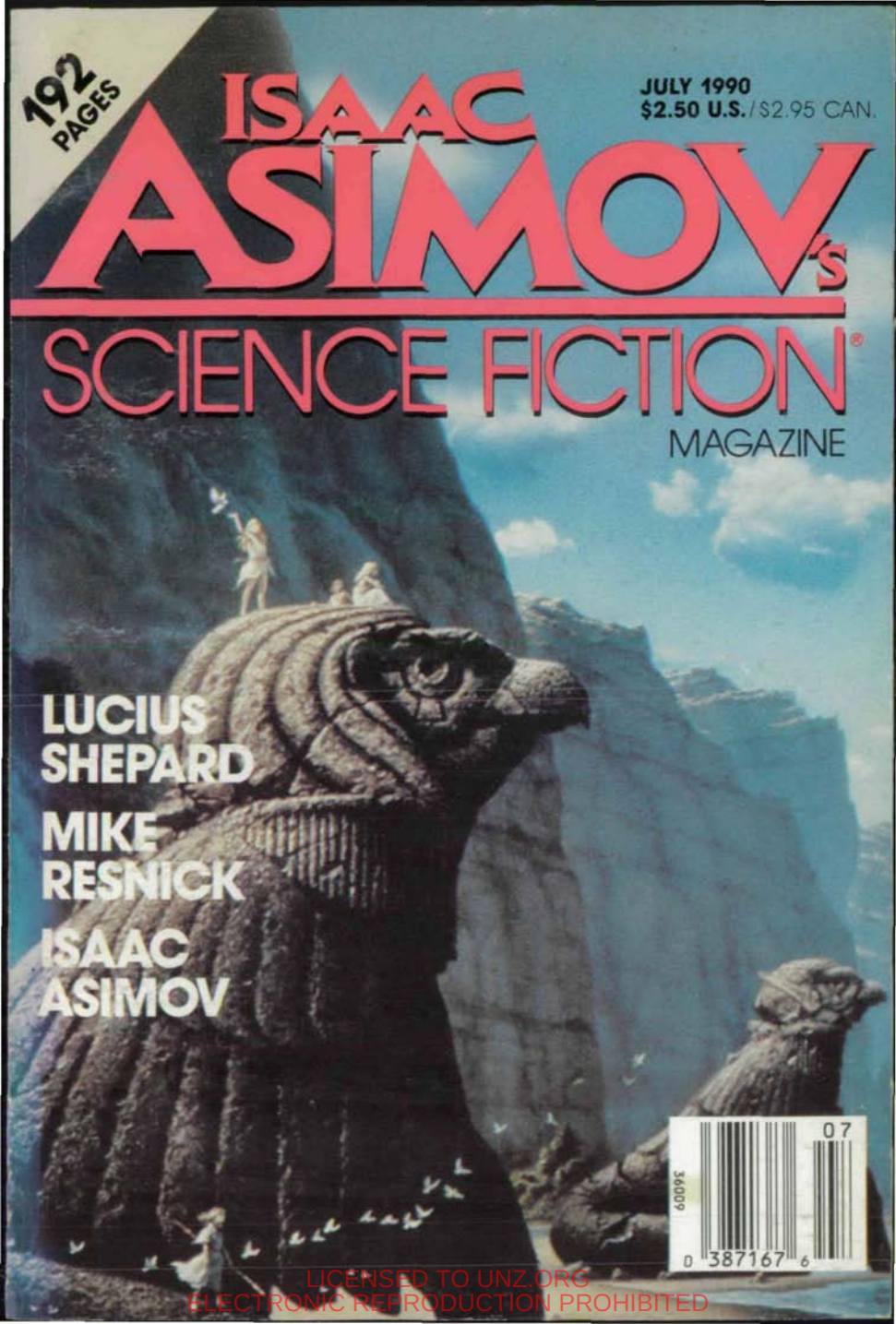

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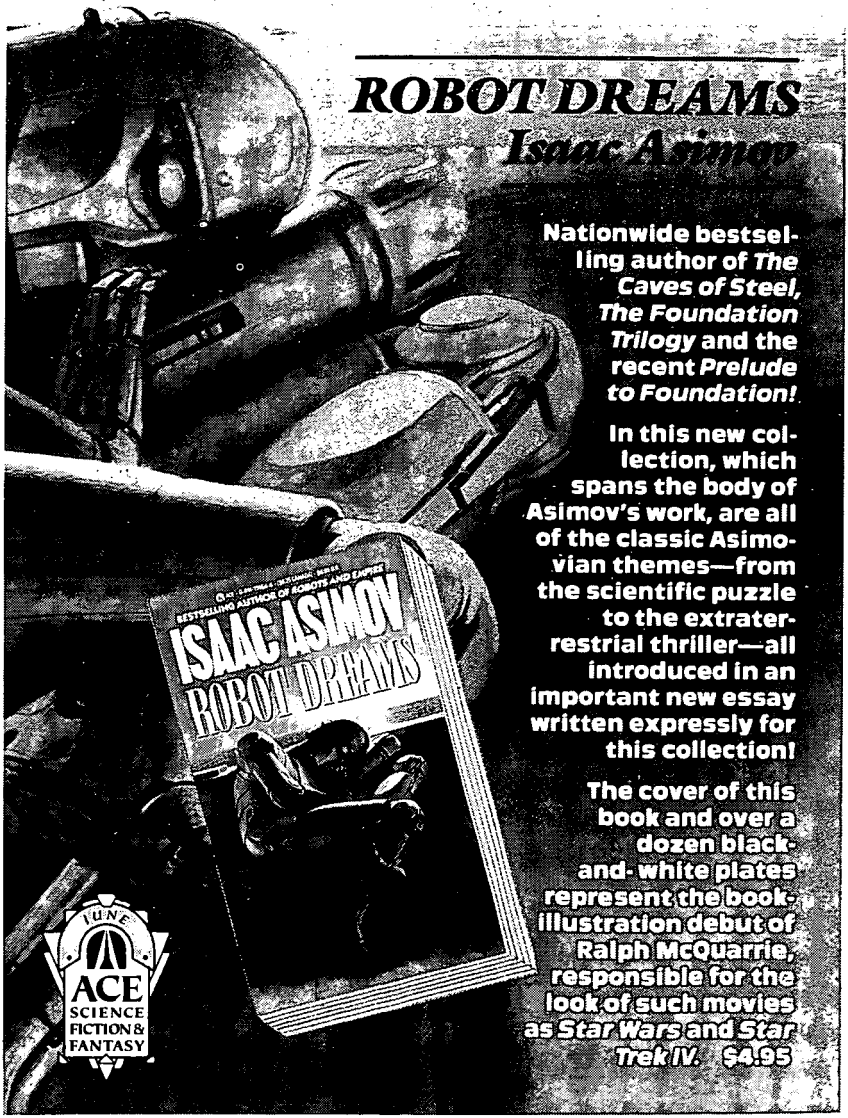
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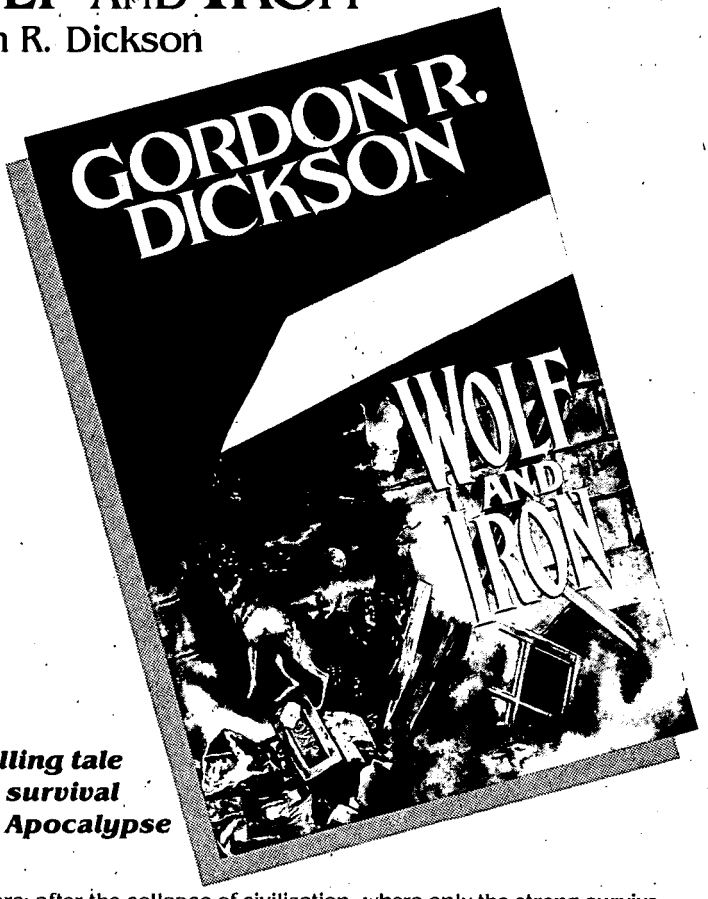

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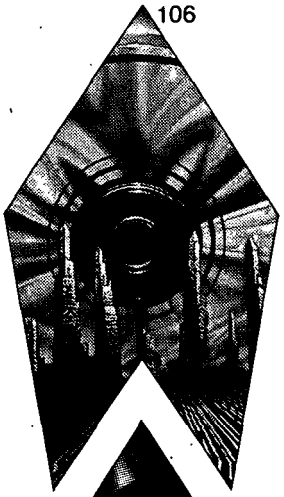

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

FIGUREHEAD?

Such is my fear of missing a deadline that these editorials of mine are usually delivered to the magazine a month or six weeks ahead of deadline. I am that far ahead of deadline right now with a just completed editorial, and yet here I am sitting down to write *another* editorial so that at my next visit to the offices of the magazine, I will deliver two of them.

Why? Because something has happened that is so personally distressing to me that I can't sit still till I defuse the situation.

In doing so, I will have to explain some of my peculiarities. (I have many of them, as anyone who knows me will be willing to testify—with a fond laugh, I hope.)

I don't mind most forms of criticism. I am quite accustomed to people who seem to take it for granted that I am a monster of vanity and arrogance, and who proceed to say so, loudly and even offensively. I shrug it off, because I know that this is easy to believe for reasons I'll get to.

I also don't mind very much having people tell me that some particular piece of writing that I have committed is poorly done. (Well, not *very* much. Sometimes I am trapped into peevishness when I think the criticism is particularly incompetent and may even be irritated enough to answer back, but that happens *very* rarely.)

I am not even upset when people imply that I publish only because of the power of my name, even though that is manifestly not so. There are some writers who have never been rejected, but I am not one of them. I've received two rejections in the last month—which shows you the power of my name, since they were *not* submitted under a pseudonym.

I am distressed, however, and intensely so, if it is ever implied, even indirectly, that I have been lying. I simply do not lie even when a carefully chosen lie might save me a lot of trouble. I realize that, in this respect, I am swimming against the current. Several recent presidents of the United States have lied freely even when they would have been better off telling the truth. Preachers who have been caught in sexual and financial scandals also dredge up lies when they have to and don't seem to worry about

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annoying the God they claim to believe in.

My own reluctance to lie I do not necessarily attribute to superior virtue. Partly it is because of the strenuous upbringing by my patriarchal father, and partly it is because I have led so quiet and peaceful (dull?) a life that I have rarely had to face the temptation to lie.

Incidentally, it is my reluctance to lie that gets me into trouble on the score of "vanity and arrogance." When I was going through basic training in the army, we had some physical tests, running, pushups, and such like stuff, and I finished dead last by a sizable margin. We also had an intelligence test, and I finished dead first, again by a sizable margin. I don't bring either into the conversation voluntarily, but if the subject matter does come up I freely, and without embarrassment, admit my being dead last physically, and, equally freely and equally without embarrassment, admit my being dead first mentally. I get no credit for the former, but the latter always brings on mutterings of "What vanity!" Nonsense, truth is truth, and I'm not going to lie my way into modesty.

Now let us get on to the event that has upset me. An old friend of mine felt that this magazine had done something that had hurt him and so he addressed a letter of complaint to me.

I responded at once, telling him, quite truthfully, that this was the

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first I had heard of it, and I would speak to the people at the magazine to see if something could be done.

He wrote again, with heavy-handed sarcasm, quite obviously refusing to believe that I had known nothing of the event, and said that he presumed then I didn't write the editorials, or the answers to the letters, and he ended by wanting to know who wrote my books.

It was totally uncalled for, because I was telling him the truth, and I feel I ought to tell the total readership of the magazine my exact role in it, to prevent similar misunderstandings among others.

Here is my responsibility, my *total* responsibility for this magazine.

1.) I allowed the use of my name in the name of the magazine. This was done because Mr. Joel Davis, the publisher, wanted it done, and because he convinced me that the use of my name would give the magazine a greater chance to succeed and to serve as another market for aspiring young science fiction writers and another source of pleasure for science fiction readers. It took considerable time to convince me of this, which is strange considering how vain and arrogant I am, but there you are.

2.) I am supposed to give this magazine first chance at my science fiction stories and to write as many as I can for it. I fulfil this. When a publisher of mine sold one of my shorts to *Omni* magazine for serialization, I pulled it out and gave it to *Asimov's* instead, at one-tenth the price. I don't write as many stories as the magazine would like to have, but I write as many as I can. And they are not required to take my stories either. George Scithers, Shawna McCarthy, and Gardner Dozois have each, in their time, rejected one or more of my stories. (Both Eleanor Sullivan and Cathleen Jordan, who edit Davis's two mystery magazines, have also rejected me at times.—I run the same risks all other writers do.)

3.) I am supposed to write an editorial for each issue, and I have done so. Since the magazine has indeed turned out to be a success —or at least, to the point where it is in its thirteenth year and has been winning awards consistently —it means I have written well over 150 editorials so far. I have written every one of them. I have not farmed out an editorial a single time and I have never even come close to missing a deadline.

4.) I read all the letters from readers that arrive and winnow out those I suggest be published, and for each of them write an answer myself. Any answer that appears over my name is written by me and by no one else.

5.) Once a week, I show up at the magazine's office to bring in my editorials and answered letters and to pick up additional letters. I ask whether there are any crises for which my advice or help is needed and the almost invariable answer is that there aren't any. That pleases me and I then leave!

Now, then, consider these fur-

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ther facts. The Chestertonian Gardner Dozois is the editor of this magazine. He is the editor in the fullest sense. He, and no one else, accepts and rejects manuscripts, and it is he who is entirely responsible for the direction the magazine takes.

Sweet Sheila Williams is the managing editor. She is responsible for the day-to-day on-the-spot running of the magazine, since Gardner does most of his editorial work at his Philadelphia home. She has been doing this for years, is thoroughly competent, and loves the magazine almost as much as she loves her husband.

Cynthia Manson is in charge of the subsidiary rights department and I have never seen anyone work as hard as she does.

All right, then. Gardner, Sheila, and Cynthia do their work entirely *without* consulting me. They may easily bring about some important project that I know nothing about, and that was the case in the matter of the project that disturbed my friend. I knew vaguely that something of the sort was in the works, but the precise angle that disturbed him was unknown to me.

Does that make me a figurehead? In some ways, sure, but the ways in which I'm a figurehead are known to everyone. I'm called "Editorial Director" but when it's Hugo time, it is Gardner who gets the Hugo. No one offers to give it to me, or even dreams of it. And that is as it should be. He does the work and bears the responsibility. (And, incidentally, he gets a full salary for his work, and I get only a modest stipend for mine, and that's as it should be, too.)

And would anyone want me *not* to be a figurehead? Do you think that for one moment I would try to overrule Gardner or tell him what to do, when he's got the talent for the job and I absolutely do not?

But why should a person of my well-known vanity and arrogance be willing to be a figurehead?

For one thing, I love what I do. I am delighted at the chance to write an editorial every four weeks and speak my mind. I love reading the letters and answering them. And I love turning out an occasional robot story, or a George-and-Azazel.

For another, in some ways, I'm *not* a figurehead. If my name helps the magazine succeed that's important to me, to everyone who works on it, and to the science fiction world in general. My editorials and letter answers lend a certain aura to the magazine which may be helpful, too. And the people at Davis—Sweet Sheila, especially—seem to enjoy my weekly visits.

Anyway, I hope my role at *Asimov*'s is now perfectly clear. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Asimov and Dozois,

The September *IAsfm* was an unusually good issue capped off and made excellent by Bruce Sterling's "Dori Bangs." This unique, surprising story rang out clear as a bell. Stories of this sort can easily fall on their faces but Sterling had just the right touch: sad and perfectly human, so that it somehow left the reader uplifted.

I hope you'll continue to publish Sterling's work so we can find out what direction he takes next.

Damian Kilby
Killingworth, CT

I trust Bruce will read your letter and feel inspired to write more stories and send them to us. We would be delighted to have them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, et al:

Science fiction stories have certainly changed in the last ten years. I was unaware of this because until reading the April 1989 *IAsfm* issue and the July '89 issue of *Analog*, I had read little current science fiction during that period although I continued reading the older novels and stories in anthologies. You are perhaps unaware of the change. You are too close to it.

What was the major change? A switch to what I would call SF-Detective fiction which can include solving problems such as finding the perfect Chipper to finding God to finding oneself, etc., often with Time wrenched askew.

Other changes include a general lack of humor, use of four-letter words in most stories, and loose morals (or more realism) which means more soap. Politics. Personal problems (quitting smoking), etc. I miss the humor to break up the reading of a fundamentally depressing issue, but I am not against any of the changes. I just don't see that the changes ADD anything to science fiction. If they are absolutely necessary to the story line, then I agree they (4-letter words and hopping from bed to bed) should be included. Rapid scene shifts and a myriad of characters are making these current stories harder to follow.

The story in your issue closest to the old style is "More Than Night" by Richard Paul Russo. It was an engrossing account. Yet, it was the detective trying to solve a deep mystery. Loose morals and a rape attempt were added for color and realism and as an example of mental incapacity but were not really necessary to the plot. Other ex-

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amples could have been found.

Dr. Asimov: I am amazed that even you could have gotten your story, "The Mad Scientist," printed in *Analog*. I must have misunderstood it completely. It, to me, was simply an account of a con man spinning a tall tale in order to elicit money or meals or favors. If I am right, and I wrote one like it myself to submit to your magazine before I read your story, you simply load a nonscientific plot line with gobs of scientific jargon and call the result science fiction. I call "The Mad Scientist" and my two pages meant for humor to be nothing but science fiction fraud. But, I see that I should not submit my short short story until I get your guidelines which would probably tell me not to submit such a story, so I won't. I may send it to *Analog* instead. What I really wanted, anyway, was to know if you would add an "Edited by" line to a forty-sixty page beginning Algebra and Geometry book I have written so I can get it published without paying. You could share any royalties. Or do you have a better suggestion? Thank you.

Jerry D. Pickard
Seattle, WA

You seem to be in a very bad temper, and I'm afraid that I can't take you very seriously, though perhaps other readers might have something to say on the subject. As for my story "The Mad Scientist" it is one of a series of satires, and you obviously don't grasp the purpose of satire. As for your forty-sixty page book, I do have a better suggestion. Throw it away.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov,

I was very disappointed to see the misconception that turning off the color on your TV will return a colorized film to its original black and white state given credence to in Matthew J. Costello's "Neat Stuff" column (*IAsfm*, August 1989). The colorization process first "bleaches" out the dark areas of the original black and white in order that the colors may be seen when overlaid. Then the lightest areas are generally colorized, so turning off the color on your TV gets you an image in which the darks have been lightened and the lights darkened, creating an overall greyness nothing like the original contrast of the film. (And that doesn't take into consideration the problems you may have getting the color reset correctly on your set later.)

As to Mr. Costello's comparing colorization with the old two-strip Technicolor process I can only say he must have a very bad eye to equate them. I've seen several two-strip videos in my collection (including *Mystery of the Wax Museum*) and it's impossible to confuse that process with the crudities of colorization.

Sincerely,

Donald W. Schank
Freehold, NJ

Not being a visual person, and much preferring print to images, this is not an argument I can usefully involve myself in, but I must say that the few times I have looked at a colorized film, I have been made uneasy by the artificiality of the appearance. Maybe the technique will improve with time.

—Isaac Asimov

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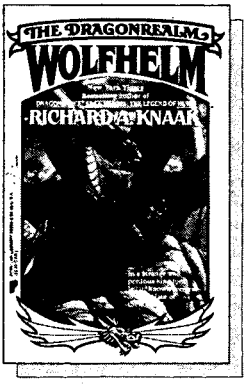

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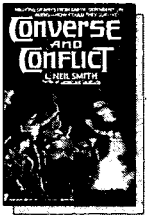

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

When the wolf's at the door my first thought is always *escape*.

Okay, sometimes the wolf is only an irate copy chief (yes, I know my column is overdue) or an angry production coordinator (honest, I'll transmit the manuscript to you on Monday) or an extremely tolerant spouse (who did you say we were seeing for dinner?).

No death threats, just the demands of a normal day... and trips to the "Dragonrealm" make a normal day that much easier to take.

When you see me around, ask me about December 7, 1941.

Arigato.

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Dear Doctor,

It happens the same way every month (twice in December). I purchase a copy of *IAsfm* and dutifully read the Editorial, Letters, and On Books—in that order. I then place *IAsfm* in my "read later" pile, where it sits until the Nebula and Hugo nominations are announced. At that time I frantically rummage through my "read later" pile of *IAsfm*'s until I find the stories that have inevitably been nominated for awards. I proceed to read said stories and admonish myself for not having read them at the time of publication. I have been reading science fiction magazines since the early 50s and often find the editorial and letters columns more interesting than the stories.

Please Doctor, tell me, is there something wrong?

Sincerely,

Michael W. Waite
Ypsilanti, MI

No, I don't think anything is wrong. The various departments are short, often personal, and the effect is like listening in on a party line as compared to listening to a serious talk. So continue to read the departments first—but then go on to read the stories. You won't be sorry.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been a fan of yours for a long time and I have only subscribed to your wonderful magazine for less than a year. I find it to be very refreshing with a variety of stories and excellent authors.

In particular I am writing about a story which appeared in the July issue. The story was called "Time-Out" and was authored by Connie Willis. On page 151 the story suggests that Fermilab is a cyclotron. It is actually a tevatron. Just wanted to correct that error.

Sincerely,

Jason Anderson
Argenta, IL

PS: Keep up the good work. *Prelude to Foundation* was a masterpiece.

Corrections of this sort are not trivial. Good science fiction stories (like all of Connie's) are sure to be anthologized and there is therefore a useful chance to correct a factual error.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I hope you will print this. It is important to every one of us! Being an .SF magazine, however, I will understand if this letter cannot be used in the editorial column. In any case, because of what I have been seeing and reading lately, I must make this attempt!

I am a chemist with a strong feeling of concern over an apparently large chunk of misinformation flooding America today. More and more people are voicing unwarranted fears and paranoias related to the present day use of nuclear power. It seems that they know very little about its function and/or working mechanisms other than the grapevine horror stories they have heard. This causes many of them to stand against it in general and I am afraid that because of this we are jogging backward technologically.

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I feel that those who understand nuclear power need to help educate others in its mechanism and importance in Earth's future. We need it to make scientific advances and of course, none of us would be here without it, since our sun is a nuclear furnace.

In its most dangerous form, nuclear power when used as an energy source is much safer and cleaner than coal. Please, let us bond together and help America into its greatest achievements. Let us not watch civilization go down the drain because of irrational fears.

For more information on nuclear energy I would suggest consulting your local library or university physics department.

Thank you for letting me voice my opinions.

Sincerely,

Garrett Krueger
St. Paul, MN

I agree that the fossil fuels are poisoning the atmosphere and, by pumping carbon dioxide into the air, are producing a greenhouse effect that will have incalculable consequences. However, it is difficult to counter the effect of a Three Mile Island or a Chernobyl. I'm on your side but perhaps we had better move on to hydrogen fusion and solar energy.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Good Doctor,

First of all, I would like to give you a big THANKS! I recently wrote and asked you to sign a book plate for me. I already had a leather bound copy of your works in which to place it, but I accidentally sent two book plates. In your utter kindness, instead of complaining, you graciously signed them both. Since you were so kind, I immediately went and bought *The Asimov Chronicles*. Mind you, I wanted it anyway, but that just gave me extra incentive.

Secondly, in a recent remark you made in the Letters Column, you stated that it was lonely being the only one who liked Azazel (or something to that effect)! There are those of us out here who have the exquisite taste necessary to like anything you write. All we want is a good story! Whether it be about robots, empires, or something completely farcical, if it is a good story, we will like it! It serves to entertain, does it not? Please, please, PLEASE! just keep on writing about anything, just keep on writing!

Daniel R. Shannon
Chattanooga, TN

I'll keep on writing. I'll keep on writing. No one has to beg. I've been doing it for fifty years. Why should I stop now?

—Isaac Asimov

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THE LEGEND OF THE MANNIKIN GULLIVER AND BROBDINGNAG

Glumdalclitch wept buckets
For the loss of her living doll,
Perfectly formed,
With his beautiful skin,
And sweet little voice.

When she grew she tried to tell her children
The marvellous stories told her
By her *grildrig*
Of the land of little people
Not much bigger than a hand.

How could they think, with brains so small?
The smallest asked,
And she admitted that she didn't know.

The King, horrified by the tale
The mannikin had told
Of gunpowder,
Had ordered all the records of his stay expunged.

She couldn't prove he'd been
Or force belief.
But she remembered,
As the basses of the common voices
Rumbled in the air about her,
The music of a high, sweet voice.

Her youngest child, in later years,
Became a fine composer,
Best known for writing for the flute.

—Ruth Berman

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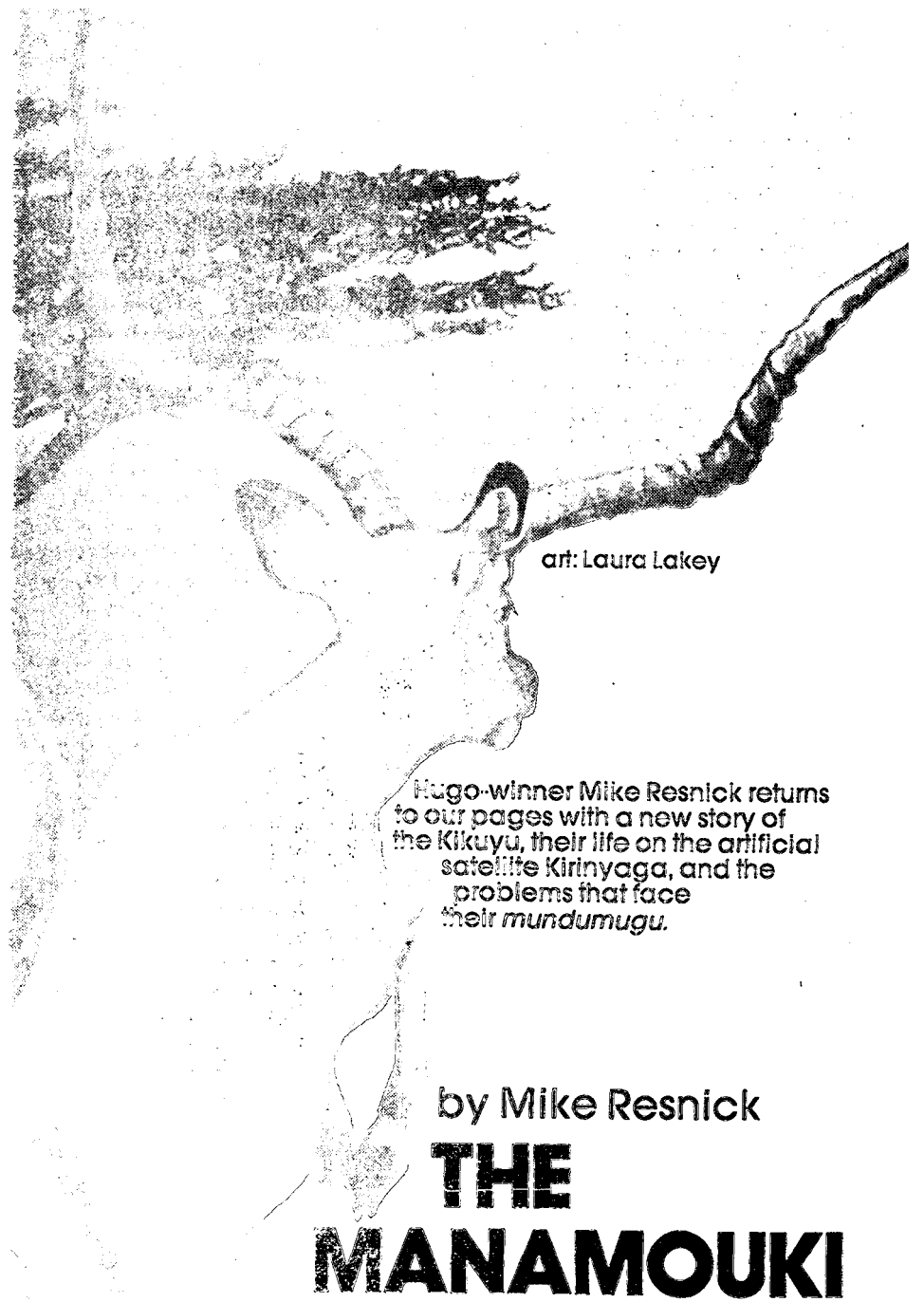

art: Laura Lakey

Hugo-winner Mike Resnick returns to our pages with a new story of the Kikuyu, their life on the artificial satellite Kirinyaga, and the problems that face their *mundumugu.*

by Mike Resnick

THE MANAMOUKI

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Many eons ago, the children of Gikuyu, who was himself the first Kikuyu, lived on the slopes of the holy mountain Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya.

There were many serpents on the mountain, but the sons and grandsons of Gikuyu found them repulsive, and they soon killed all but one.

Then one day the last serpent entered their village and killed and ate a young child. The children of Gikuyu sought out their *mundumugu*—their witch doctor—and asked him to destroy the menace.

The *mundumugu* rolled the bones and sacrificed a goat, and finally he created a poison that would kill the serpent. He slit open the belly of another goat, and placed the poison inside it, and left it beneath a tree, and the very next day the serpent swallowed the goat and died.

"Now," said the *mundumugu*, "you must cut the serpent into one hundred pieces and scatter them on the holy mountain, so that no demon can breathe life back into its body."

The children of Gikuyu did as they were instructed, and scattered the hundred pieces of the serpent across the slopes of Kirinyaga. But during the night, each piece came to life and became a new serpent, and soon the Kikuyu were afraid to leave their *bomas*.

The *mundumugu* ascended the mountain, and when he neared the highest peak, he addressed Ngai.

"We are beseiged by serpents," he said. "If you do not slay them, then the Kikuyu shall surely die as a people."

"I made the serpent, just as I made the Kikuyu and all other things," answered Ngai, who sat on His golden throne atop Kirinyaga. "And anything that I made, be it a man or a serpent or a tree or even an idea, is not repellent in My eyes. I will save you this one time, because you are young and ignorant, but you must never forget that you cannot destroy that which you find repulsive—for if you try to destroy it, it will always return one hundred times greater than before."

This is one of the reasons why the Kikuyu chose to till the soil rather than hunt the beasts of the jungle like the Wakamba, or make war on their neighbors like the Maasai, for they had no wish to see that which they destroyed return to plague them. It is a lesson taught by every *mundumugu* to his people, even after we left Kenya and emigrated to the terraformed world of Kirinyaga.

In the entire history of our tribe, only one *mundumugu* ever forgot the lesson that Ngai taught atop the holy mountain on that distant day.

And that *mundumugu* was myself.

When I awoke, I found hyena dung within the thorn enclosure of my *boma*. That alone should have warned me that the day carried a curse,

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for there is no worse omen. Also the breeze, hot and dry and filled with dust, came from the west, and all good winds come from the east.

It was the day that our first immigrants were due to arrive. We had argued long and hard against allowing any newcomers to settle on Kirinyaga, for we were dedicated to the old ways of our people, and we wanted no outside influences corrupting the society that we had created. But our charter clearly stated that any Kikuyu who pledged to obey our laws and made the necessary payments to the Eutopian Council could emigrate from Kenya, and after postponing the inevitable for as long as we could, we finally agreed to accept Thomas Nkobe and his wife.

Of all the candidates for immigration, Nkobe had seemed the best. He had been born in Kenya, had grown up in the shadow of the holy mountain, and after going abroad for his schooling, had returned and run the large farm his family had purchased from one of the last European residents. Most important of all, he was a direct descendant of Jomo Kenyatta, the great Burning Spear of Kenya, who had led us to independence.

I trudged out across the hot, arid savannah to the tiny landing field at Haven to greet our new arrivals, accompanied only by Ndemi, my youthful assistant. Twice buffalo blocked our path, and once Ndemi had to hurl some stones to frighten a hyena away, but eventually we reached our destination, only to discover that the Maintenance ship which was carrying Nkobe and his wife had not yet arrived. I squatted down in the shade of an acacia tree, and a moment later Ndemi crouched down beside me.

"They are late," he said, peering into the cloudless sky. "Perhaps they will not come at all."

"They will come," I said. "The signs all point to it."

"But they are bad signs, and Nkobe may be a good man."

"There are many good men," I replied. "Not all of them belong on Kirinyaga."

"You are worried, Koriba?" asked Ndemi as a pair of crested cranes walked through the dry, brittle grass.

"I am concerned," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I do not know why he wants to live here."

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Ndemi, picking up a dry twig and methodically breaking it into tiny pieces. "Is it not Utopia?"

"There are many different notions of Utopia," I replied. "Kirinyaga is the Kikuyus'."

"And Nkobe is a Kikuyu, so this is where he belongs," said Ndemi decisively.

"I wonder."

"Why?"

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"Because he is almost forty years old. Why did he wait so long to come here?"

"Perhaps he could not afford to come sooner."

I shook my head. "He comes from a very wealthy family."

"They have many cattle?" asked Ndemi.

"Many," I said.

"And goats?"

I nodded.

"Will he bring them with him?"

"No. He will come empty-handed, as we all did." I paused, frowning. "Why would a man who owned a large farm and had many tractors and men to do his work turn his back on all that he possessed? That is what troubles me."

"You make it sound like the way he lived on Earth was better," said Ndemi.

"Not better, just different."

He paused for a moment. "Koriba, what *is* a tractor?"

"A machine that does the work of many men in the fields."

"It sounds truly wonderful," offered Ndemi.

"It makes deep wounds in the ground and stinks of gasoline," I said, making no effort to hide my contempt.

We sat in silence for another moment. Then the Maintenance ship came into view, its descent creating a huge cloud of dust and causing a great screeching and squawking by the birds and monkeys in the nearby trees. "Well," I said, "we shall soon have our answer."

I remained in the shade until the ship had touched down and Thomas Nkobe and his wife emerged from its interior. He was a tall, well-built man dressed in casual Western clothes; she was slender and graceful, her hair elegantly braided, her khaki slacks and hunting jacket exquisitely tailored.

"Hello!" said Nkobe in English as I approached him. "I was afraid we might have to find our way to the village ourselves."

"*Jambo,*" I replied in Swahili. "Welcome to Kirinyaga."

"*Jambo,*" he amended, switching to Swahili. "Are you Koinnage?"

"No," I answered. "Koinnage is our paramount chief. You will live in his village."

"And you are?"

"I am Koriba," I said.

"He is the *mundumugu,*" added Ndemi proudly. "I am Ndemi." He paused. "Someday I will be a *mundumugu* too."

Nkobe smiled down at him. "I'm sure you will." Suddenly he remembered his wife. "And this is Wanda."

She stepped forward, smiled, and extended her hand. "A true *mun-*

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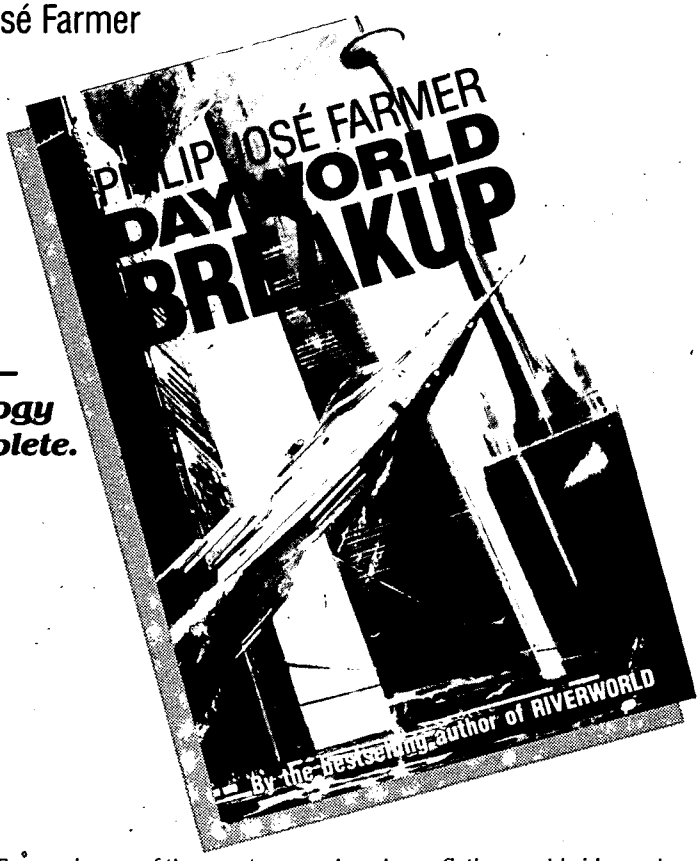
DAYWORLD BREAKUP

Philip José Farmer



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dumugu!" she said in heavily-accented Swahili. "I'm thrilled to meet you!"

"I hope you will enjoy your new life on Kirinyaga," I said, shaking her hand.

"Oh, I'm certain I will," she replied enthusiastically, as the ship disgorged their baggage and promptly took off again. She looked around at the dry savannah, and saw a trio of maribou storks and a jackal patiently waiting for a hyena to finish gorging itself on the wildebeest calf it had killed earlier in the morning. "I love it already!" She paused, then added confidentially, "I'm really the one who got Tom to agree to come here."

"Oh?"

She nodded her head. "I just couldn't stand what Kenya has become. All those factories, all that pollution! Ever since I learned about Kirinyaga, I've wanted to move here, to come back to Nature and live the way we were meant to live." She inhaled deeply. "Smell that air, Tom! It will add ten years to your life."

"You don't have to sell me any more," he said with a smile. "I'm here, aren't I?"

I turned to Wanda Nkobe. "You yourself are not Kikuyu, are you?"

"I am now," she replied. "Ever since I married Tom. But to answer your question, no, I was born and raised in Oregon."

"Oregon?" repeated Ndemi, brushing some flies away from his face with his hand.

"That's in America," she explained. She paused. "By the way, why are we speaking Swahili rather than Kikuyu?"

"Kikuyu is a dead language," I said. "Most of our people no longer know it."

"I had rather hoped it would still be spoken here," she said, obviously disappointed. "I've been studying it for months."

"If you had moved to Italy, you would not speak Latin," I replied. "We still use a few Kikuyu words, just as the Italians use a few Latin words."

She was silent for a moment, then shrugged. "At least I'll have the opportunity to improve my Swahili."

"I am surprised that you are willing to forego the amenities of America for Kirinyaga," I said, studying her closely.

"I was willing years ago," she answered. "It was Tom who had to be convinced, not me." She paused. "Besides, I gave up most of those so-called amenities when I left America and moved to Kenya."

"Even Kenya has certain luxuries," I noted. "We have no electricity here, no running water, no—"

"We camp out whenever we can," she said, and I placed a hand on Ndemi's shoulder before he could chide her for interrupting the *mundumugu*. "I'm used to roughing it."

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"But you have always had a home to return to."

She stared at me, an amused smile on her face. "Are you trying to talk me out of moving here?"

"No," I replied. "But I wish to point out that nothing is immutable. Any member of our society who is unhappy and wishes to leave need only inform Maintenance of the fact and a ship will arrive at Haven an hour later."

"Not us," she said. "We're in for the long haul."

"The long haul?" I repeated.

"She means that we're here to stay," explained Nkobe, putting an arm around his wife's shoulders.

A hot breeze sent the dust swirling around us.

"I think I should take you to the village," I said, shielding my eyes. "You are doubtless tired and will wish to rest."

"Not at all," said Wanda Nkobe. "This is a brand-new world. I want to look around." Her gaze fell upon Ndemi, who was staring at her intently. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"You are very strong and sturdy," said Ndemi approvingly. "That is good. You will bear many children."

"I certainly hope not," she said. "If there's one thing Kenya has more than enough of, it's children."

"This is not Kenya," said Ndemi.

"I will find other ways to contribute to the society."

Ndemi studied her for a moment. "Well," he said at last, "I suppose you can carry firewood."

"I'm glad I meet with your approval," she said.

"But you will need a new name," continued Ndemi. "Wanda is a European name."

"It is just a name," I said. "Changing it will not make her more of a Kikuyu."

"I have no objection," she interjected. "I'm starting a new life; I *ought* to have a new name."

I shrugged. "Which name will you take as your own?"

She smiled at Ndemi. "You choose one," she said.

He furrowed his brow for a long moment, then looked up at her. "My mother's sister, who died in childbirth last year, was named Mwange, and now there is no one in the village of that name."

"Then Mwange it shall be," she said. "Mwange wa Ndemi."

"But I am not your father," said Ndemi.

She smiled at him. "You are the father of my new name."

Ndemi puffed his chest up proudly.

"Well, now that *that's* settled," said Nkobe, "what about our luggage?"

"You will not need it," I said.

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"Yes we will," said Mwange.

"You were told to bring nothing of Kenya with you."

"I've brought some *kikois* that I made myself," she said. "Surely that must be permissible, since I will be expected to weave my own fabrics and make my own clothes on Kirinyaga."

I considered her explanation for a moment, then nodded my consent. "I will send one of the village children for the bags."

"It's not that heavy," said Nkobe. "I can carry it myself."

"Kikuyu men do not fetch and carry," said Ndemi.

"What about Kikuyu women?" asked Mwange, obviously reluctant to leave the luggage behind.

"They carry firewood and grain, not bags of clothing," responded Ndemi. "*Those,*" he said, pointing contemptuously toward the two leather bags, "are for children."

"Then we might as well start walking," said Mwange. "There are no children here."

Ndemi beamed with pride and strutted forward.

"Let Ndemi go first," I said. "His eyes are young and clear. He will be able to see any snakes or hyenas hiding in the tall grass."

"Do you have poisonous snakes here?" asked Nkobe.

"A few."

"Why don't you kill them?"

"Because this is not Kenya," I replied.

I walked directly behind Ndemi, and Nkobe and Mwange followed us, remarking upon the scenery and the animals to each other. After about half a mile we came to an impala ram standing directly in our path.

"Isn't he beautiful?" whispered Mwange. "Look at the horns on him!"

"I wish I had my camera with me!" said Nkobe.

"We do not permit cameras on Kirinyaga," I said.

"I know," said Nkobe. "But to be perfectly honest, I can't see how something as simple as a camera could be a corrupting influence to your society."

"To have a camera, one needs film, and one must therefore have a factory that manufactures both cameras and films. To develop the film, one needs chemicals, and then one must find a place to dump those chemicals that haven't been used. To print the pictures, one needs photographic paper, and we have barely enough wood to burn in our fires." I paused. "Kirinyaga supplies us with all of our desires. That is why we came here."

"Kirinyaga supplies you with all of your *needs,*" said Mwange. "That is not quite the same thing."

Suddenly Ndemi stopped walking and turned to her.

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"This is your first day here, so you are to be forgiven your ignorance," he explained. "But no *manamouki* may argue with the *mundumugu*."

"*Manamouki*?" she repeated. "What is a *manamouki*?"

"*You* are," said Ndemi.

"I've heard that word before," said Nkobe. "I think it means *wife*."

"You are wrong," I said. "A *manamouki* is a female."

"You mean a woman?" asked Mwange.

I shook my head. "*Any* female property," I said. "A woman, a cow, a sow, a bitch, a ewe."

"And Ndemi thinks I'm some kind of property?"

"You are Nkobe's *manamouki*," said Ndemi.

She considered it for a moment, then shrugged with amusement. "What the hell," she said in English. "If Wanda was only a name, *manamouki* is only a word. I can live with it."

"I hope so," I replied in Swahili, "for you will have to."

She turned to me. "I know we are the first immigrants to come to Kirinyaga, and that you must have your doubts about us—but this is the life I've always wanted. I'm going to be the best damned *manamouki* you ever saw."

"I hope so," I said, but I noticed that the wind still blew from the west.

I introduced Nkobe and Mwange to their neighbors, showed them their *shamba* where they would grow their food, pointed out their six cattle and ten goats and recommended that they lock them in their *boma* at night to protect them from the hyenas, told them how to reach the river to procure water, and left them at the entrance to their hut. Mwange seemed enthused about everything, and was soon engaged in animated conversation with the women who came by to look at her strange outfit.

"She is very nice," commented Ndemi as I walked through the fields, blessing the scarecrows. "Perhaps the omens you read were wrong."

"Perhaps," I said.

He stared at me. "But you do not think so."

"No."

"Well, *I* like her," he said.

"That is your right."

"Do you dislike her, then?"

I paused as I considered my answer.

"No," I said at last. "I fear her."

"But she is just a *manamouki!*" he protested. "She can do no harm."

"Under the proper circumstances, anything can do harm."

"I do not believe it," said Ndemi.

"Do you doubt your *mundumugu's* word?" I asked.

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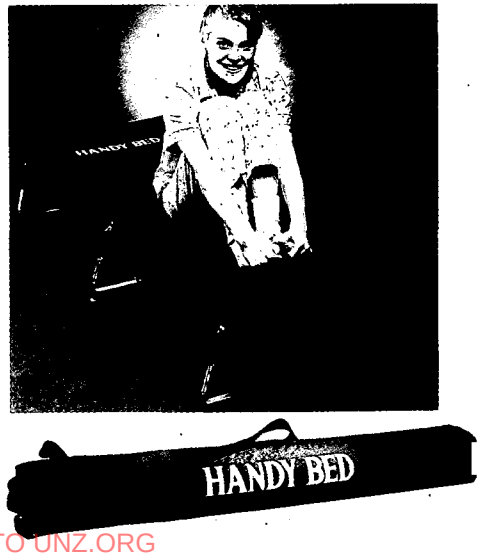

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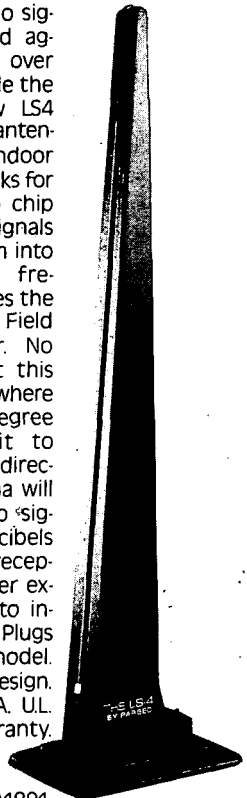

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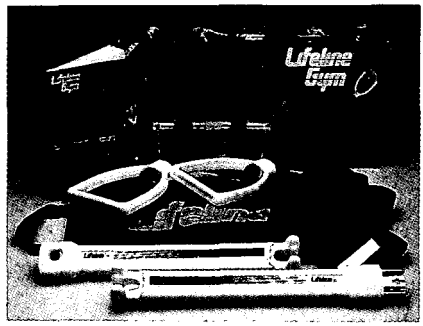

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"No," he said uncomfortably. "If you say something, then it must be true. But I cannot understand how."

I smiled wryly. "That is because you are not yet a *mundumugu*."

He stopped and pointed to a spot some three hundred yards away, where a group of impala does were grazing.

"Can even *they* do harm?" he asked.

"Yes."

"But how?" he asked, frowning. "When danger appears, they do not confront it, but run away from it. Ngai has not blessed them with horns, so they cannot defend themselves. They are not large enough to destroy our crops. They cannot even kick an enemy, as can the zebra. I do not understand."

"I shall tell you the tale of the Ugly Buffalo, and then you will understand," I said.

Ndemi smiled happily, for he loved stories above all things, and I led him to the shade of a thorn tree, where we both squatted down, facing each other.

"One day a cow buffalo was wandering through the savannah," I began. "The hyenas had recently taken her first calf, and she was very sad. Then she came upon a newborn impala, whose mother had been killed by hyenas that very morning.

" 'I would like to take you home with me,' said the buffalo, 'for I am very lonely, and have much love in my heart. But you are not a buffalo.'

" 'I, too, am very lonely,' said the impala. 'And if you leave me here, alone and unprotected, I surely will not survive the night.'

" 'There is a problem,' said the buffalo. 'You are an impala, and we are buffalo. You do not belong with us.'

" 'I will become the best buffalo of all,' promised the impala. 'I will eat what you eat, drink what you drink, go where you go.'

" 'How can you become a buffalo? You cannot even grow horns.'

" 'Then I will wear the branches of a tree upon my head.'

" 'You do not wallow in the mud to protect your skin from parasites,' noted the buffalo.

" 'Take me home with you and I will cover myself with more mud than any other buffalo,' said the impala.

"For every objection the buffalo raised, the impala had an answer, and finally the buffalo agreed to take the impala back with her. Most of the members of the herd thought that the impala was the ugliest buffalo they had ever seen"—Ndemi chuckled at that—"but because the impala tried so hard to act like a buffalo, they allowed her to remain.

"Then one day a number of young buffalo were grazing some distance from the herd, and they came to a deep mud wallow that blocked their way.

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" 'We must return to the herd,' said one of the young buffalo.

" 'Why?' asked the impala. 'There is fresh grass on the other side of the wallow.'

" 'Because we have been warned that a deep wallow such as this can suck us down beneath the surface and kill us.'

" 'I do not believe it,' said the impala, and, bolder than her companions, she walked out to the center of the mud wallow.

" 'You see?' she said. 'I have not been sucked beneath the surface. It is perfectly safe.'

"Soon three of the young buffalo ventured out across the mud wallow, and each in turn was sucked beneath the surface and drowned.

" 'It is the ugly buffalo's fault,' said the king of the herd. 'It was she who told them to cross the mud wallow.'

" 'But she meant no harm,' said her foster mother. 'And what she told them was true: the wallow was safe for her. All she wants is to live with the herd and be a buffalo; please do not punish her."

"The king was blessed with more generosity than wisdom, and so he forgave the ugly buffalo.

"Then, a week later, the ugly buffalo, who could leap as high as a tall bush, jumped up in the air and saw a pack of hyenas lurking in the grass. She waited until they were almost close enough to catch her, and then cried out a warning. All the buffalo began running, but the hyenas were able to catch the ugly buffalo's foster mother, and they pulled her down and killed her.

"Most of the other buffalo were grateful to the ugly buffalo for warning them, but during the intervening week there had been a new king, and this one was wiser than the previous one.

" 'It is the ugly buffalo's fault,' he said.

" 'How can it be her fault?' asked one of the older buffalo. 'It was she who warned us of the hyenas.'

" 'But she only warned you when it was too late,' said the king. 'Had she warned you when she first saw the hyenas, her mother would still be among us. But she forgot that we cannot run as fast as she can, and so her mother is dead.'

"And the new king, though his heart was sad, decreed that the ugly buffalo must leave the herd, for there is a great difference between being a buffalo and *wanting* to be a buffalo."

I leaned back against the tree, my story completed.

"Did the ugly buffalo survive?" asked Ndemi.

I shrugged and brushed a crawling insect from my forearm. "That is another story."

"She meant no harm."

"But she caused harm nonetheless."

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Ndemi traced patterns in the dirt with his finger as he considered my answer, then looked up at me. "But if she had not been with the herd, the hyenas would have killed her mother anyway."

"Perhaps."

"Then it was not her fault."

"If I fall asleep against this tree, and you see a black mamba slithering through the grass toward me, and you make no attempt to wake me, and the mamba kills me, would you be to blame for my death?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Even though it would certainly have killed me had you not been here?"

Ndemi frowned. "It is a difficult problem."

"Yes, it is."

"The mud wallow was much easier," he said. "That was surely the ugly buffalo's fault, for without her urging, the other buffalo would never have entered it."

"That is true," I said.

Ndemi remained motionless for a few moments, still wrestling with the nuances of the story.

"You are saying that there are many different ways to cause harm," he announced.

"Yes."

"And that it takes wisdom to understand who is to blame, for the foolish king did not recognize the harm of the ugly buffalo's action, while the wise king knew that she was to blame for her inaction."

I nodded my head.

"I see," said Ndemi.

"And what has this to do with the *manamouki?*" I asked.

He paused again. "If harm comes to the village, you must use your wisdom to decide whether Mwange, who wants nothing more than to be a Kikuyu, is responsible for it."

"That is correct," I said, getting to my feet.

"But I still do not know what harm she can do."

"Neither do I," I answered.

"Will you know it when you see it?" he asked. "Or will it seem like a good deed, such as warning the herd that hyenas are near?"

I made no reply.

"Why are you silent, Koriba?" asked Ndemi at last.

I sighed heavily. "Because there are some questions that even a *mundumugu* cannot answer."

Ndemi was waiting for me, as usual, when I emerged from my hut five mornings later.

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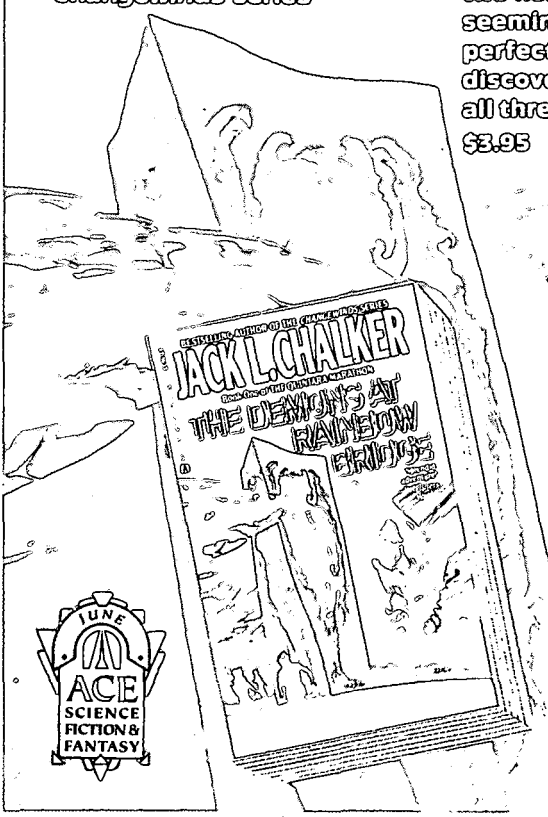

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"*Jambo,* Koriba," he said.

I grunted a greeting and walked over to the fire that he had built, sitting cross-legged next to it until it removed the chill from my aging bones.

"What is today's lesson?" he asked at last.

"Today I will teach you how to ask Ngai for a fruitful harvest," I answered.

"But we did that last week."

"And we will do it next week, and many more weeks as well," I answered.

"When will I learn how to make ointments to cure the sick, or how to turn an enemy into an insect so that I may step on him?"

"When you are older," I said.

"I am already old."

"And more mature."

"How will you know when I am more mature?" he persisted.

"I will know because you will have gone an entire month without asking about ointments or magic, for patience is one of the most important virtues a *mundumugu* can possess." I got to my feet. "Now take my gourds to the river and fill them with water," I said, indicating two empty water gourds.

"Yes, Koriba," he said dejectedly.

While I was waiting for him, I went into my hut, activated my computer, and instructed Maintenance to make a minor orbital adjustment that would bring rain and cooler air to the western plains.

This done, I slung my pouch around my neck and went back out into my *boma* to see if Ndemi had returned, but instead of my youthful apprentice, I found Wambu, Koinnage's senior wife, waiting for me, bristling with barely controlled fury.

"*Jambo,* Wambu," I said.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," she replied.

"You wish to speak to me?"

She nodded. "It is about the Kenyan woman."

"Oh?"

"Yes," said Wambu. "You must make her leave!"

"What has Mwange done?" I asked.

"I am the senior wife of the paramount chief, am I not?" demanded Wambu.

"That is true."

"She does not treat me with the respect that is my due."

"In what way?" I asked.

"In *all* ways!"

"For example?"

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"Her *khanga* is much more beautiful than mine. The colors are brighter, the designs more intricate, the fabric softer."

"She wove her *khanga* on her own loom, in the old way," I said.

"What difference does *that* make?" snapped Wambu.

I frowned. "Do you wish me to make her give you the *khanga*?" I asked, trying to understand her rage.

"No!"

"Then I do not understand," I said.

"You are no different than Koinnage!" she said, obviously frustrated that I could not comprehend her complaint. "You may be a *mundumugu,* but you are still a man!"

"Perhaps if you told me more," I suggested.

"Kibo was as silly as a child," she said, referring to Koinnage's youngest wife, "but I was training her to be a good wife. Now she wants to be like the Kenyan woman."

"But the Kenyan woman," I said, using her terminology, "wants to be like *you.*"

"She cannot be like me!" Wambu practically shouted at me. "I am Koinnage's senior wife!"

"I mean that she wants to be a member of the village."

"Impossible!" scoffed Wambu. "She speaks of many strange things."

"Such as?"

"It does not matter! You must make her leave!"

"For wearing a pretty *khanga* and making a good impression on Kibo?" I said.

"Bah!" she snapped. "You are just like Koinnage! You pretend not to understand, but you know she must go!"

"I truly do not understand," I said.

"You are *my mundumugu,* not hers. I will pay you two fat goats to place a *thahu* on her."

"I will not place a curse on Mwange for the reasons you gave me," I said firmly.

She glared at me for a long moment, then spat on the ground, turned on her heel and walked back down the winding path to the village, muttering furiously to herself, practically knocking Ndemi down as he returned with my water gourds.

I spent the next two hours instructing Ndemi in the harvest prayer, then told him to go into the village and bring Mwange back. An hour later Mwange, resplendent in her *khanga,* climbed up my hill, accompanied by Ndemi, and entered my *boma.*

"*Jambo,*" I greeted her.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," she replied. "Ndemi says that you wish to speak to me."

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I nodded. "That is true."

"The other women seemed to think I should be frightened."

"I cannot imagine why," I said.

"Perhaps it is because you can call down the lightning, and change hyenas into insects, and kill your enemies from miles away," suggested Ndemi helpfully.

"Perhaps," I said.

"Why have you sent for me?" asked Mwange.

I paused for a moment, trying to think of how best to approach the subject. "There is a problem with your clothing," I said at last.

"But I am wearing a *khanga* that I wove on my own loom," she said, obviously puzzled.

"I know," I responded. "But the quality of the fabric and the subtlety of the colors, have caused a certain . . . " I searched for the proper word.

"Resentment?" she suggested.

"Precisely," I answered, grateful that she so quickly comprehended the situation. "I think it would be best if you were to weave some less colorful garments."

I half-expected her to protest, but she surprised me by agreeing immediately.

"Certainly," she said. "I have no wish to offend my neighbors. May I ask who objected to my *khanga?*"

"Why?"

"I'd like to make her a present of it."

"It was Wambu," I said.

"I should have realized the effect my clothing would have. I am truly sorry, Koriba."

"Anyone may make a mistake," I said. "As long as it is corrected, no lasting harm will be done."

"I hope you're right," she said sincerely.

"He is the *mundumugu,*" said Ndemi. "He is always right."

"I don't want the women to be resentful of me," continued Mwange. "Perhaps I could find some way to show my good intentions." She paused. "What if I were to offer to teach them to speak Kikuyu?"

"No *manamouki* may be a teacher," I explained. "Only the chiefs and the *mundumugu* may instruct our people."

"That's not very efficient," she said. "It may very well be that someone besides yourself and the chiefs has something to offer."

"It is possible," I agreed. "Now let me ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"Did you come to Kirinyaga to be efficient?"

She sighed. "No," she admitted. She paused for a moment. "Is there anything else?"

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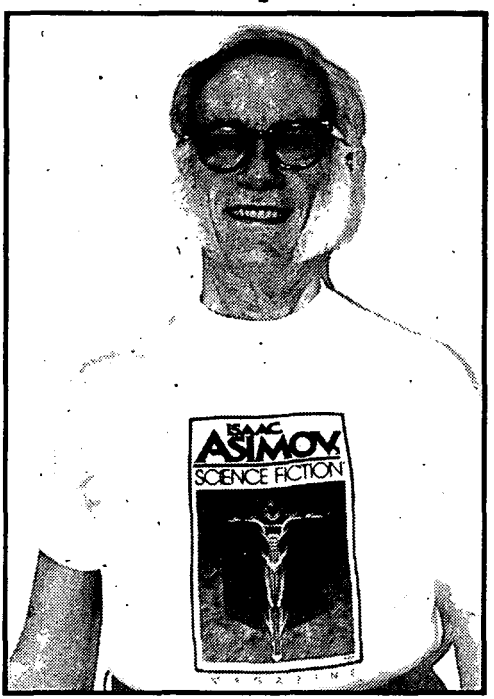

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"No."

"Then I think I'd better go back and begin weaving my new fabric."

I nodded my approval, and she walked back down the long, winding path to the village.

"When I become *mundumugu,*" said Ndemi, watching her retreating figure, "I will not allow any *manamoukis* to argue with *me.*"

"A *mundumugu* must also show understanding," I said. "Mwange is new here, and has much to learn."

"About Kirinyaga?"

I shook my head. "About *manamoukis.*"

Life proceeded smoothly and uneventfully for almost six weeks, until just after the short rains. Then one morning, just as I was preparing to go down into the village to bless the scarecrows, three of the women came up the path to my *boma.*

There was Sabo, the widow of old Kadamu, and Bori, the second wife of Sabana, and Wambu.

"We must speak with you, *mundumugu,*" said Wambu.

I sat down, cross-legged, in front of my hut, and waited for them to seat themselves opposite me.

"You may speak," I said.

"It is about the Kenyan woman," said Wambu.

"Oh?" I said. "I thought the problem was solved."

"It is not."

"Did she not present you with her *khanga* as a gift?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You are not wearing it," I noted.

"It does not fit," said Wambu.

"It is only a piece of cloth," I said. "How can it not fit?"

"It does not fit," she repeated adamantly.

I shrugged. "What is this new problem?"

"She flaunts the traditions of the Kikuyu," said Wambu.

I turned to the other women. "Is this true?" I asked.

Sabo nodded. "She is a married woman, and she has not shaved her head."

"And she keeps flowers in her hut," added Bori.

"It is not the custom for Kenyan women to shave their heads," I replied. "I will instruct her to do so. As for the flowers, they are not in violation of our laws."

"But *why* does she keep them?" persisted Bori.

"Perhaps she thinks they are pleasing to the eye," I suggested.

"But now my daughter wants to grow flowers, and she answers with disrespect when I tell it her is more important to grow food to eat."

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"And now the Kenyan woman has made a throne for her husband, Nkobe," put in Sabo.

"A throne?" I repeated.

"She put a back and arms on his sitting stool," said Sabo. "What man besides a chief sits upon a throne? Does she think Nkobe will replace Koinnage?"

"*Never!*" snarled Wambu.

"And she has made another throne for herself," continued Sabo. "Even Wambu does not sit atop a throne."

"These are not thrones, but chairs," I said.

"Why can she not use stools, like all the other members of the village?" demanded Sabo.

"I think she is a witch," said Wambu.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Just look at her," said Wambu. "She has seen the long rains come and go thirty-five times, and yet her back is not bent, and her skin is not wrinkled, and she has all her teeth."

"Her vegetables grow better than ours," added Sabo, "and yet she spends less time planting and tending to them than we do." She paused. "I think she *must* be a witch."

"And although she carries with her the worst of all *thahus,* that of barrenness, she acts as if she is not cursed at all," said Bori.

"And her new garments are still more beautiful than ours," muttered Sabo sullenly.

"That is true," agreed Bori. "Now Sabana is displeased with me because his *kikoi* is not so bright and soft as Nkobe's."

"And my daughters all want thrones instead of sitting stools," added Sabo. "I tell them that we have scarely enough wood for the fire, and they say that this is more important. She has turned their heads. They no longer respect their elders."

"The young women all listen to her, as if *she* were the wife of a chief instead of a barren *manamouki,*" complained Wambu. "You must send her away, Koriba."

"Are you giving me an order, Wambu?" I asked softly, and the other two women immediately fell silent.

"She is an evil witch, and she must go," insisted Wambu, her outrage overcoming her fear of disobeying her *mundumugu.*

"She is not a witch," I said, "for if she were, then I, your *mundumugu,* would certainly know it. She is just a *manamouki* who is trying to learn our ways, and who, as you note, carries the terrible *thahu* of barrenness with her."

"If she is less than a witch, she is still more than a *manamouki,*" said Sabo.

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"More in what way?" I asked.

"Just more," she answered with a sullen expression.

Which totally summed up the problem.

"I will speak to her again," I said.

"And you will make her shave her head?" demanded Wambu.

"Yes."

"And remove the flowers from her hut?"

"I will discuss it."

"Perhaps you can tell Nkobe to beat her from time to time," added Sabo. "Then she would not act so much like a chief's wife."

"I feel very sorry for him," said Bori.

"For Nkobe?" I asked.

Bori nodded. "To be cursed with such a wife, and further, to have no children."

"He is a good man," agreed Sabo. "He deserves better than the Kenyan woman."

"It is my understanding that he is perfectly happy with Mwange," I said.

"That is all the more reason to pity him, for being so foolish," said Wambu.

"Have you come here to talk about Mwange or Nkobe?" I asked.

"We have said what we have come to say," replied Wambu, getting to her feet. "You must do something, *mundumugu*."

"I will look into the matter," I said.

She walked down the path to the village, followed by Sabo. Bori, her back bent from carrying firewood all her life, her stomach distended from producing three sons and five daughters, all but nine of her teeth missing, her legs permanently bowed from some childhood disease, Bori, who had seen but thirty-four long rains, stood before me for a moment.

"She really *is* a witch, Koriba," she said. "You have only to look at her to know it."

Then she, too, left my hill and returned to the village.

Once again I summoned Mwange to my *boma*.

She came up the path with the graceful stride of a young girl, lithe and lean and filled with energy.

"How old are you, Mwange?" I asked as she approached me.

"Thirty-eight," she replied. "I usually tell people that I'm thirty-five, though," she added with a smile. She stood still for a moment. "Is that why you asked me to come here? To talk about my age?"

"No," I said. "Sit down, Mwange."

She seated herself on the dirt by the ashes of my morning fire, and I squatted across from her.

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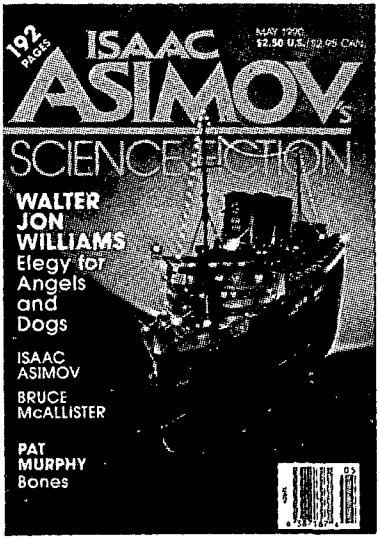

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"How are you adjusting to your new life on Kirinyaga?" I asked at last.

"Very well," she said enthusiastically. "I've made many friends, and I find that I don't miss the amenities of Kenya at all."

"Then you are happy here?"

"Very."

"Tell me about your friends."

"Well, my closest friend is Kibo, Koinnage's youngest wife, and I have helped Sumi and Kalena with their gardens, and—"

"Have you no friends among the older women?" I interrupted.

"Not really," she admitted.

"Why should that be?" I asked. "They are women of your own age."

"We don't seem to have anything to talk about."

"Do you find them unfriendly?" I asked.

She considered the question. "Ndemi's mother has always been very kind to me. The others could be a little friendlier, I suppose, but I imagine that's just because most of them are senior wives and are very busy running their households."

"Did it ever occur to you that there could be some other reason why they are not friendly?" I suggested.

"What are you getting at?" she asked, suddenly alert.

"There is a problem," I said.

"Oh?"

"Some of the older women resent your presence."

"Because I'm an immigrant?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Then why?" she persisted, genuinely puzzled.

"It is because we have a very rigid social order here, and you have not yet fit in."

"I thought I was fitting in very well," she said defensively.

"You were mistaken."

"Give me an example."

I looked at her. "You know that Kikuyu wives must shave their heads, and yet you have not done so."

She sighed and touched her hair. "I know," she replied. "I've been meaning to, but I'm very fond of it. I'll shave my head tonight." She seemed visibly relieved. "Is that what this is all about?"

"No," I said. "That is merely an outward sign of the problem."

"Then I don't understand."

"It is difficult to explain," I said. "Your *khangas* are more pleasing to the eye than theirs. Your garden grows better. You are as old as Wambu, but appear younger than her daughters. In their minds, these things set you apart from them and make you more than a *manamouki*. The cor-

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ollary, which they have not yet voiced but must surely feel, is that if you are somehow *more,* then this makes them somehow *less.*"

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked. "Wear rags and let my gardens go to seed?"

"No," I said. "I do not expect that."

"Then what can I do?" she continued. "You're telling me that they feel threatened because I am competent." She paused. "*You* are a competent man, Koriba. You have been schooled in Europe and America, you can read and write and work a computer. And yet I notice that you feel no need to hide your talents."

"I am a *mundumugu,*" I said. "I live alone on my hill, removed from the village, and I am viewed with awe and fear by my people. This is the function of a *mundumugu.* It is not the function of a *manamouki,* who must live in the village and find her place in the social order of the tribe."

"That's what I am trying to do," she said in frustration.

"Do not try so hard."

"If you're not telling me to be incompetent, then I *still* don't understand."

"One does not fit in by being different," I said. "For example, I know that you bring flowers into your house. Doubtless they are fragrant and pleasing to the eye, but no other woman in the village decorates her hut with flowers."

"That's not true," she said defensively. "Sumi does."

"If so, then she does it because *you* do it," I pointed out. "Can you see that this is even more threatening to the older women than if you alone kept flowers, for it challenges their authority?"

She stared at me, trying to comprehend.

"They have spent their entire lives achieving their positions within the tribe," I continued, "and now you have come here and taken a position entirely outside of their order. We have a new world to populate: You are barren, but far from feeling shame or grief, you act as though this is not a terrible *thahu.* Such an attitude is contrary to their experience, just as decorating your house with flowers or creating *khangas* with intricate patterns is contrary to their experience, and thus they feel threatened."

"I still don't see what I can do about it," she protested. "I gave my original *khangas* to Wambu, but she refuses to wear them. And I have offered to show Bori how to get a greater yield from her gardens, but she won't listen."

"Of course not," I replied. "Senior wives will not accept advice from a *manamouki,* any more than a chief would accept advice from a newly circumcised young man. You must simply"—here I switched to English,

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for there is no comparable term in Swahili—"maintain a low profile. If you do so, in time the problems will go away."

She paused for a moment, considering what I had told her.

"I'll try," she said at last.

"And if you *must* do something that will call attention to yourself," I continued, reverting to Swahili, "try to do it in a way that will not offend."

"I didn't even know I *was* offending," she said. "How am I to avoid it if I'm calling attention to myself?"

"There are ways," I answered. "Take, for example, the chair that you built."

"Tom has had back spasms for years," she said. "I built the chair because he couldn't get enough support from a stool. Am I supposed to let my husband suffer because some of the women don't believe in chairs?"

"No," I said. "But you can tell the younger women that Nkobe ordered you to build the chair, and thus the stigma will not be upon you."

"Then it will be upon him."

I shook my head. "Men have far greater leeway here than women. There will be no stigma upon him for ordering his *manamouki* to see to his comfort." I paused long enough for the thought to sink in. "Do you understand?"

She sighed. "Yes."

"And you will do as I suggest?"

"If I'm to live in peace with my neighbors, I suppose I must."

"There is always an alternative," I said.

She shook her head vigorously. "I've dreamed of a place like this all my life, and nobody is going to make me leave it now that I'm here. I'll do whatever I have to do."

"Good," I said, getting to my feet to signify that the interview was over. "Then the problem will soon be solved."

But, of course, it wasn't.

I spent the next two weeks visiting a neighboring village whose chief had died quite suddenly. He had no sons and no brothers, and the line of succession was in doubt. I listened to all the applicants to the throne, discussed the situation with the Council of Elders until there was unanimity, presided at the ceremony that installed the new chief in his ceremonial robes and headdress, and finally returned to my own village.

As I climbed the path to my *boma,* I saw a female figure sitting just outside my hut. I drew closer and saw that it was Shima, Ndemi's mother.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," she said.

"*Jambo,* Shima," I responded.

"You are well, I trust."

"As well as an old man can feel after walking for most of the day," I

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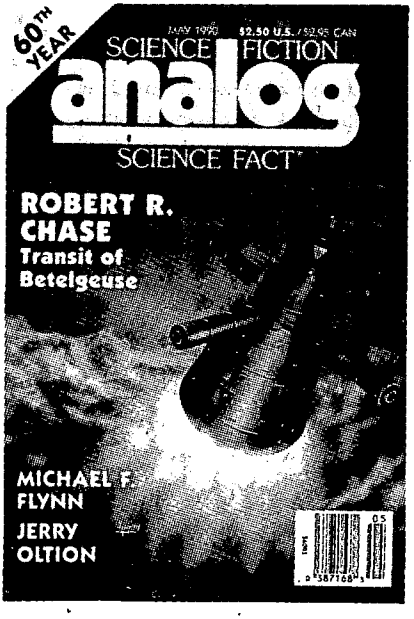

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responded, sitting down opposite her. I looked around my *boma*. "I do not see Ndemi."

"I sent him to the village for the afternoon, because I wished to speak to you alone."

"Does this concern Ndemi?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It is about Mwange."

I sighed wearily. "Proceed."

"I am not like the other women, Koriba," she began. "I have always been good to the Mwange."

"So she has told me."

"Her ways do not bother me," she continued. "After all, someday I shall be the mother of the *mundumugu,* and while there can be many senior wives, there can be only one *mundumugu* and one *mundumugu's* mother."

"This is true," I said, waiting for her to get to the point of her visit.

"Therefore, I have befriended Mwange, and have shown her many kindnesses, and she has responded in kind."

"I am pleased to hear it."

"And because I have befriended her," continued Shima, "I have felt great compassion for her, because as you know she carries the *thahu* of barrenness. And it seemed to me that, since Nkobe is such a wealthy man, that he should take another wife to help Mwange with the work on the *shamba* and to produce sons and daughters." She paused. "My daughter Shuni, as you know, will be circumcised before the short rains come, and so I approached Mwange as a friend, and as the mother of the future *mundumugu,* to suggest that Nkobe pay the bride price for Shuni." Here she paused again, and frowned. "She got very mad and yelled at me. You must speak to her, Koriba. A rich man like Nkobe should not be forced to live with only a barren wife."

"Why do you keep calling Nkobe a rich man?" I asked. "His *shamba* is small, and he has only six cattle."

"His family is rich," she stated. "Ndemi told me that they have many men and machines to do their planting and harvesting."

Thank you for nothing, little Ndemi, I thought irritably. Aloud I said: "All that is back on Earth. Here Nkobe is a poor man."

"Even if he is poor," said Shima, "he will not remain poor, for grain and vegetables grow for Mwange as for no one else, as if this is Ngai's blessing to make up for His *thahu* of barrenness." She stared at me. "You must talk to her, Koriba. This would be a good thing. Shuni is very obedient and hard-working, and she already likes Mwange very much. We will not demand a large bride price, for we know that the *mundumugu's* family will never go hungry."

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"Why did you not wait for Nkobe to approach you, as is the custom?" I asked.

"I thought if I explained my idea to Mwange, she would see the wisdom of it and speak to Nkobe herself, for he listens to her more than most husbands listen to their wives, and surely the thought of a fertile woman who would share her chores would appeal to her."

"Well, you have presented your idea to her," I said. "Now it is up to Nkobe to make the offer or choose not to."

"But she says that she will permit him to marry no one else," answered Shima, more puzzled than outraged, "as if a *manamouki* could stop her husband from buying another wife. She is ignorant of our ways, Koriba, and for this reason you must speak with her. You must point out that she should be grateful to have another woman with whom to speak and share the work, and she should not want Nkobe to die without having fathered any children just because *she* has been cursed." She hesitated for a moment, and then concluded: "And you should remind her that Shuni will someday be sister to the *mundumugu*."

"I am glad that you are so concerned about Mwange's future," I said at last.

She caught the trace of sarcasm in my voice.

"Is it so wrong to be concerned about my little Shuni as well?" she demanded.

"No," I admitted. "No, it is not wrong."

"Oh!" said Shima, as if she had suddenly remembered something important. "When you speak to Mwange, remind her that she is named for my sister."

"I do not intend to speak to Mwange at all."

"Oh?"

"No," I said. "As you yourself pointed out, this is not her concern. I will speak to Nkobe."

"And you will mention Shuni?" she persisted.

"I will speak to Nkobe," I answered noncommittally.

She got to her feet and prepared to leave.

"You can do me a favor, Shima," I said.

"Oh?"

I nodded. "Have Ndemi come to my *boma* immediately. I have many tasks for him to do here."

"How can you be sure, since you have only just returned?"

"I am sure," I said adamantly.

She looked across my *boma,* still the protective mother. "I can see no chores that have been left undone."

"Then I will find some," I said.

* * *

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I went down to the village in the afternoon, for old Siboki needed ointments to keep the pain from his joints, and Koinnage had asked me to help him settle a dispute between Njoro and Sangora concerning the ownership of a calf that their jointly owned cow had just produced.

When I had finished my business there, I placed charms on some of the scarecrows, and then, in midafternoon, I walked over to Nkobe's *shamba,* where I found him herding his cattle.

"*Jambo,* Koriba!" he greeted me, waving his hand.

"*Jambo,* Nkobe," I replied, approaching him.

"Would you like to come into my hut for some *pombe?*" he offered. "Mwange just brewed it yesterday."

"Thank you for the offer, but I do not care to drink warm *pombe* on a hot afternoon like this."

"It's actually quite cool," he said. "She buries the gourd in the ground to keep it that way."

"Then I will have some," I acquiesced, falling into step beside him as he drove his cattle toward his *boma.*

Mwange was waiting for us, and she invited us into the cool interior of the hut and poured our *pombe* for us, then began to leave, for *man-amoukis* do not listen to the conversation of men.

"Stay here, Mwange," I said.

"You're sure?" she said.

"Yes."

She shrugged and sat on the floor, with her back propped up against a wall of the hut.

"What brings you here, Koriba?" asked Nkobe, sitting gingerly upon his chair, and I could see that his back was troubling him. "You have not paid us a visit before."

"The *mundumugu* rarely visits those who are healthy enough to visit him," I replied.

"Then this is a special occasion," said Nkobe.

"Yes," I replied, sipping my *pombe.* "This is a special occasion."

"What is it this time?" asked Mwange warily.

"What do you mean, 'this time'?" said Nkobe sharply.

"There have been some minor problems," I answered, "none of which concern you."

"Anything that affects Mwange concerns me," responded Nkobe. "I am not blind or deaf, Koriba. I know that the older women have refused to accept her—and I'm getting more than a little bit angry about it. She has gone out of her way to fit in here, and has met them more than halfway."

"I did not come here to discuss Mwange with you," I said.

"Oh?" he said suspiciously.

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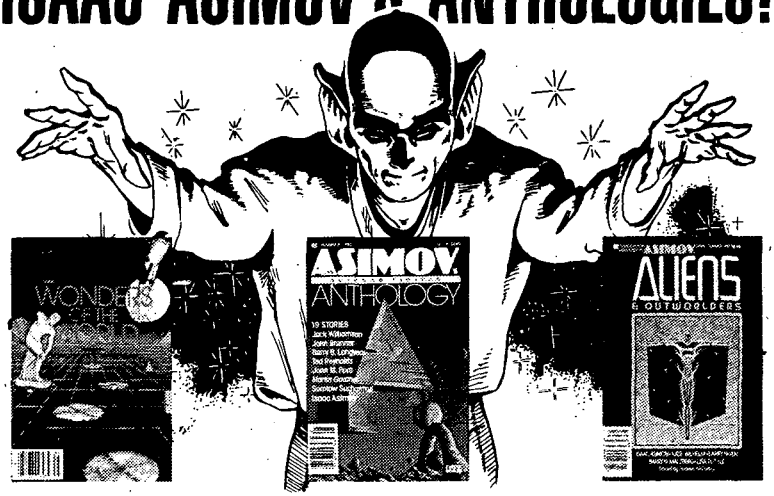

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"Are you saying we have a problem that concerns *him?*" demanded Mwange.

"It concerns both of you," I replied. "That is why I have come here."

"All right, Koriba—what is it?" said Nkobe.

"You have made a good effort to fit into the community and to live as a Kikuyu, Nkobe," I said. "And yet there is one more thing that you will be expected to do, and it is this that I have come to discuss with you."

"And what is that?"

"Sooner or later, you will be expected to take another wife."

"I knew it!" said Mwange.

"I'm very happy with the wife I have," said Nkobe with unconcealed hostility.

"That may be," I said, draining the last of my *pombe,* "but you have no children, and as Mwange gets older she will need someone to help her with her duties."

"Now you listen to me!" snapped Nkobe. "I came here because I thought it would make Mwange happy. So far she's been ostracized and shunned and gossiped about, and now you're telling me that I have to take another wife into my house so that Mwange can keep being spat on by the other women? We don't need this, Koriba! I was just as happy on my farm in Kenya. I can go back there any time I want."

"If that is the way you feel, then perhaps you should return to Kenya," I said.

"*Tom,*" said Mwange, staring at him, and he fell silent.

"It is true that you do not have to stay," I continued. "But you are Kikuyus, living on a Kikuyu world, and if you do stay, you will be expected to act as Kikuyus."

"There's no law that says a Kikuyu man must take a second wife," said Nkobe sullenly.

"No, there is no such law," I admitted. "Nor is there a law that says a Kikuyu man must father children. But these are our traditions, and you will be expected to abide by them."

"To hell with them!" he muttered in English.

Mwange laid a restraining hand on his arm. "There is a coterie of young warriors who live beyond the forest," she said. "Why don't *they* marry some of the young women? Why should the men of the village monopolize them all?"

"They cannot afford wives," I said. "That is why they live alone."

"That's *their* problem," said Nkobe.

"I've made many sacrifices in the name of communal harmony," said Mwange, "but this is asking too much, Koriba. We are happy just the way we are, and we intend to stay this way."

"You will not remain happy."

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"What does that mean?" she demanded.

"Next month is the circumcision ritual," I said. "When it is over, there will be many girls eligible for marriage, and since you are barren, it is only reasonable to suppose that a number of their families will suggest that Nkobe pay the bride price for their daughters. He may refuse once, he may refuse twice, but if he continues to refuse, he will offend most of the village. They will assume that because he comes from Kenya he feels their women are not good enough for him, and they will be further offended by the fact that he refuses to have children with which to populate our empty planet."

"Then I'll explain my reasons to them," said Nkobe.

"They will not understand," I answered.

"No, they will not understand," agreed Mwange unhappily.

"Then they will have to learn to live with it," said Nkobe firmly.

"And you will have to learn to live with silence and animosity," I said. "Is this the life you envisioned when you came to Kirinyaga?"

"Of course not!" snapped Nkobe. "But nothing can make me—"

"We will think about it, Koriba," interrupted Mwange.

Nkobe turned to his wife, stunned. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that we will think about it," repeated Mwange.

"That is all that I ask," I said, getting to my feet and walking to the door of the hut.

"You demand a lot, Koriba," said Mwange bitterly.

"I demand nothing," I replied. "I merely suggest."

"Coming from the *mundumugu*, is there a difference?"

I did not answer her, because in truth there was no difference whatsoever.

"You seem unhappy, Koriba," said Ndemi.

He had just finished feeding my chickens and my goats, and now he sat down beside me in the shade of my acacia tree.

"I am," I said.

"Mwange," he said, nodding his head.

"Mwange," I agreed.

Two weeks had passed since I had visited her and Nkobe.

"I saw her this morning, when I went to the river to fill your gourds," said Ndemi. "She, too, seems unhappy."

"She is," I said. "And there is nothing that I can do about it."

"But you are the *mundumugu*."

"I know."

"You are the most powerful of men," continued Ndemi. "Surely you can put an end to her sorrow."

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I sighed. "The *mundumugu* is both the most powerful and the weakest of men. In Mwange's case, I am the weakest."

"I do not understand."

"The *mundumugu* is the most powerful of men when it comes to interpreting the law," I said. "But he is also the weakest of men, for it is he, of all men, who must be bound by that law, no matter what else happens." I paused. "I should allow her to be what she can be, instead of being merely a *manamouki*. And failing that, I should make her leave Kirinyaga and return to Kenya." I sighed again. "But she must behave like a *manamouki* if she is to have a life here, and she has broken no law that would allow me to force her to leave."

Ndemi frowned. "Being a *mundumugu* can be more difficult than I thought."

I smiled at him and placed a hand upon his head. "Tomorrow I will begin to teach you to make the ointments that cure the sick."

"Really?" he said, his face brightening.

I nodded. "Your last statement tells me that you are no longer a child."

"I have not been a child for many rains," he protested.

"Do not say any more," I told him with a wry smile, "or we will do more harvest prayers instead."

He immediately fell silent, and I looked out across the distant savannah, where a swirling tower of dust raced across the arid plain, and wondered, for perhaps the thousandth time, what to do about Mwange.

How long I sat thus, motionless, I do not know, but eventually I felt Ndemi tugging at the blanket I had wrapped around my shoulders.

"Women," he whispered.

"What?" I said, not comprehending.

"From the village," he said, gesturing toward the path that led to my *boma*.

I looked where he indicated and saw four of the village women approaching. There was Wambu, and Sabo, and Bori, and with them this time was Morina, the second wife of Kimoda.

"Should I leave?" asked Ndemi.

I shook my head. "If you are to become a *mundumugu*, it is time you started listening to a *mundumugu's* problems."

The four women stopped perhaps ten feet away from me.

"*Jambo*," I said, staring at them.

"The Kenyan witch must leave!" said Wambu.

"We have been through this before," I said.

"But now she has broken the law," said Wambu.

"Oh?" I said. "In what way?"

Wambu grabbed Morina by the arm and shoved her even closer to me. "Tell him," she said triumphantly.

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"She has bewitched my daughter," said Morina, obviously uneasy in my presence.

"How has Mwange bewitched your daughter?" I asked.

"My Muri was a good, obedient child," said Morina. "She always helped me grind the grain, and she dutifully cared for her two younger brothers when I was working in the fields, and she never left the thorn gate open at night so that hyenas could enter our *boma* and kill our goats and cattle." She paused, and I could see that she was trying very hard not to cry. "All she could talk about since the last long rains was her forthcoming circumcision ceremony, and who she hoped would pay the bride price for her. She was a perfect daughter, a daughter any mother would be proud of." Now a tear trickled down her cheek. "And then the Kenyan woman came, and Muri spent her time with her, and now—" suddenly the single tear became a veritable flood "—now she tells me that she refuses to be circumcised. She will never marry and she will die an old, barren woman!"

Morina could speak no more, and began beating her breasts with her clenched fists.

"That is not all," added Wambu. "The reason Muri does not wish to be circumcised is because the Kenyan woman herself has not been circumcised. And yet the Kenyan woman has married a Kikuyu man, and has tried to live among us as his *manamouki*." She glared at me. "She has broken the law, Koriba! We must cast her out!"

"I am the *mundumugu*," I replied sternly. "I will decide what must be done."

"You *know* what must be done!" said Wambu furiously.

"That is all," I said. "I will hear no more."

Wambu glared at me, but did not dare to disobey me, and finally, turning on her heel, she stalked back down the path to the village, followed by Sabo and the still-wailing Morina.

Bori stood where she was for an extra moment, then turned to me.

"It is as I told you before, Koriba," she said, almost apologetically. "She really *is* a witch."

Then she, too, began walking back to the village.

"What will you do, Koriba?" asked Ndemi.

"The law is clear," I said wearily. "No uncircumcised woman may live with a Kikuyu man as his wife."

"Then you will make her leave Kirinyaga?"

"I will offer her a choice," I said, "and I will hope that she chooses to leave."

"It is too bad," said Ndemi. "She has tried very hard to be a good *manamouki*."

"I know," I said.

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"Then why is Ngai visiting her with such unhappiness?"

"Because sometimes trying is not enough."

We stood at Haven—Mwange, Nkobe, and I—awaiting the Maintenance ship's arrival.

"I am truly sorry that things did not work out," I said sincerely.

Nkobe glared at me, but said nothing.

"It didn't have to end this way," said Mwange bitterly.

"We had no choice," I said. "If we are to create our Utopia here on Kirinyaga, we must be bound by its rules."

"The fact that a rule exists does not make it right, Koriba," she said. "I gave up almost everything to live here, but I will not let them mutilate me in the name of some foolish custom."

"Without our traditions, we are not Kikuyu, but only Kenyans who live on another world," I pointed out.

"There is a difference between tradition and stagnation, Koriba," she said. "If you stifle every variation in taste and behavior in the name of the former, you achieve only the latter." She paused. "I would have been a good member of the community."

"But a poor *manamouki,*" I said. "The leopard may be a stealthy hunter and fearsome killer, but he does not belong among a pride of lions."

"Lions and leopards have been extinct for a long time, Koriba," she said. "We are talking about human beings, not animals, and no matter how many rules you make and no matter how many traditions you invoke, you cannot make all human beings think and feel and act alike."

"It's coming," announced Nkobe as the Maintenance ship broke through the thin cloud cover.

"*Kwaheri,* Nkobe," I said, extending my hand.

He looked contemptuously at my hand for a moment, then turned his back and continued watching the Maintenance ship.

I turned to Mwa[redacted]

"I tried, Koriba," she said. "I really did."

"No one ever tried harder," I said. "*Kwaheri,* Mwange."

She stared at me, her face suddenly an emotionless mask.

"Good-bye, Koriba," she said in English. "And my name is Wanda."

The next morning Shima came to me to complain that Shuni had rejected the suitor that had been arranged for her.

Two days later Wambu complained to me that Kibo, Koinnage's youngest wife, had decorated her hut with colorful ribbons, and was beginning to let her hair grow.

And the morning after that, Kimi, who had only one son, announced that she wanted no more children.

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"I thought it had ended," I said with a sigh as I watched Sangora, Kimi's distressed husband, walk back down the path to the village.

"That is because you made a mistake, Koriba."

"Why do you say that?"

"You believed the wrong story," answered Ndemi with the confidence of youth.

"Oh?"

He nodded. "You believed the story about the Ugly Buffalo."

"And which story should I have believed?"

"The story of the *mundumugu* and the serpent."

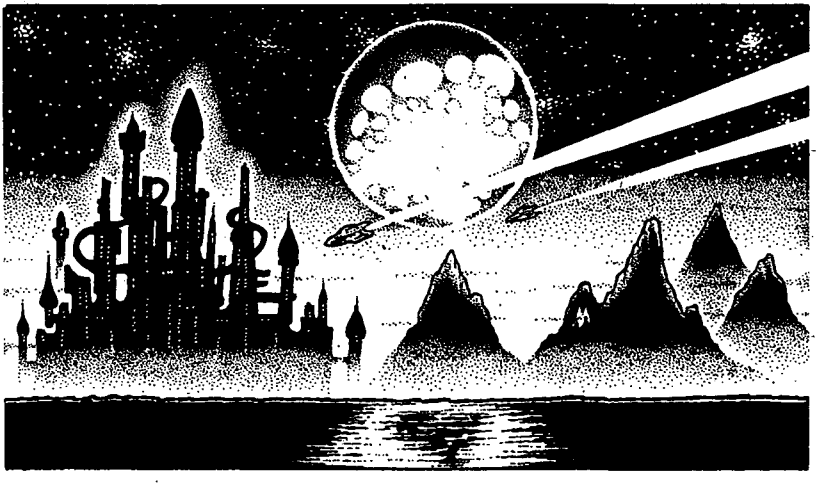
"Why do you think one story is more worthy of belief than the other?" I asked him.

"Does not the story of the *mundumugu* and the serpent tell us that we cannot be rid of that which Ngai created simply because we find it repugnant or unsettling?"

"That is true," I said.

Ndemi smiled and held up three fingers. "Shuni, Kibo, Kimi," he said, counting them off. "Three serpents have returned already. There are ninety-seven yet to come."

And suddenly I had the awful premonition that he was right. ●



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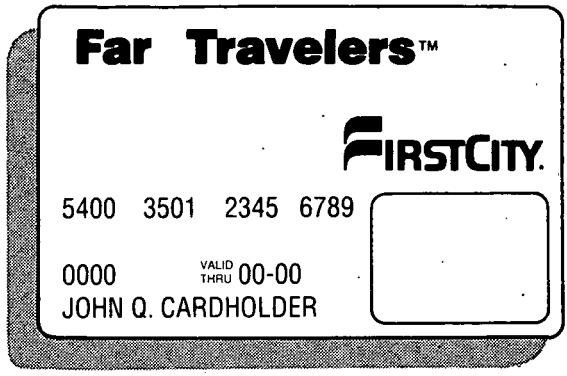

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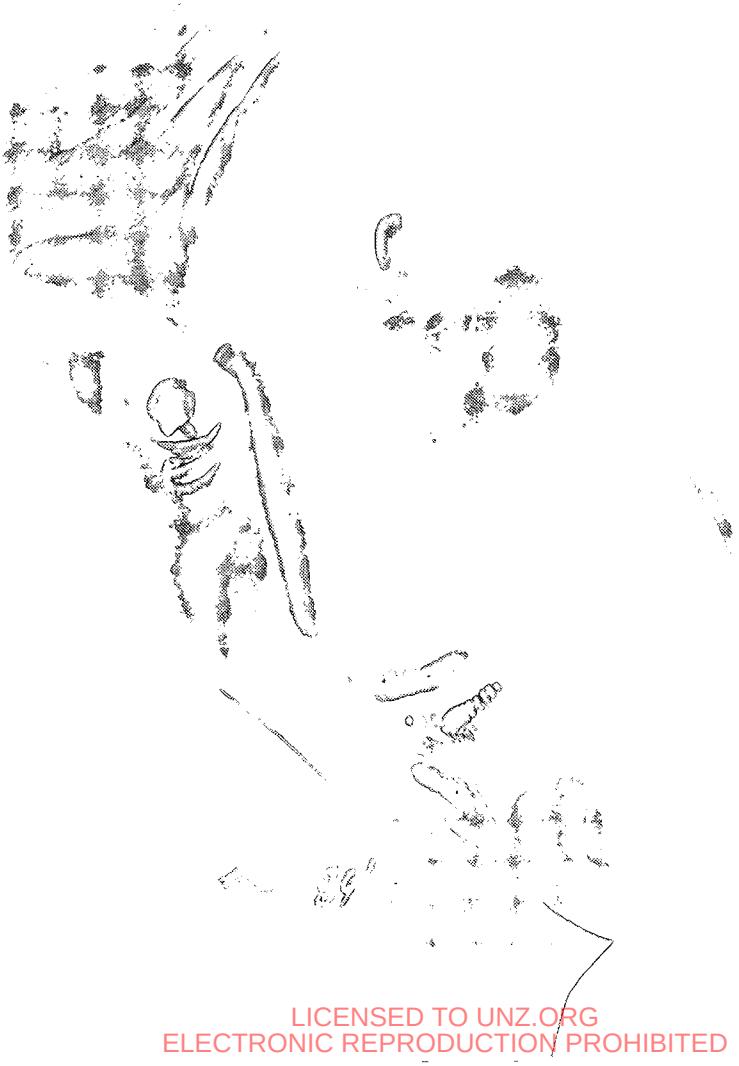

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While it may be "wine that maketh glad the heart of man," it can also be said that . . .

WINE IS A MOCKER

by Isaac Asimov

art: Gary Freeman

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George had ordered a glass of white wine with which to begin his dinner, and I had ordered a Virgin Mary, which is as close as I care to come to vinous revelry.

I sipped at my spiced tomato juice gently and became aware that George was staring at his bijou goblet with disgust. It was quite empty and I had not seen him down it. He can be extraordinarily deft at times.

"What's the matter, George?" I asked.

He sighed heavily. "In the old days," he said, "you could get a huge tankard of hearty ale for a penny."

"In what old days, George? Are we talking about the Middle Ages?"

"In the *old* days," repeated George. "Now, for just enough weak wine to cast a mist on your upper lip, you have to break into your little boy's piggy-bank—if you have one."

"What piggy-bank are you discussing? It's not even costing you that medieval penny you've just mentioned. And if you didn't have enough, order another. I'm good for it."

"I wouldn't dream of doing it," said George haughtily. "Ordinarily. But since you suggest it, and I would like to oblige you—" He tapped the rim of his empty glass and the waiter hastened to bring him another.

"Wine," he said, staring at his second goblet, "is a mocker. The Bible says that. Either Moses or Beelzebub said it."

"Actually," I said, "you'll find it in Proverbs 20:1, where it says, 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whoever is deceived thereby is not wise.' The book is attributed, by tradition, to King Solomon."

He stared at me with massive indignation. "Why on Earth do you insist in indulging in your pseudo-erudition? It gets you condemned on all sides. As I was about to say, you'll find the statement either in Habbakuk or Malachi. I suppose you're not going to argue about its being in the Bible."

"Not at all."

"There you are, then. I mentioned the fact that wine is a mocker because I was thinking of my friend, Cambyses Green."

"Cambyses?"

"He was named for some ancient oriental potentate."

"I know that," I said. "The son of Cyrus the Great of Persia. But how did he come—"

"Let us order our dinner," said George, "and I will tell you the story of Cambyses Green."

My friend, Cambyses Green [said George], who was named in honor of some ancient oriental potentate, was very nearly the most charming, the most pleasant person you could ever expect to meet. He had a never-ending fund of droll stories that he could tell in a fascinating manner. He was utterly at ease with strangers and could win them over at once.

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He was suave and charming toward young women, all of whom were fascinated with him, though he reserved his love, with all the ardor that Eros could bestow on him, for Valencia Judd, a young woman of surpassing beauty and intelligence.

It was Valencia who came to me on one occasion, her light blonde hair disheveled, her small tip-tilted nose just slightly reddened, as though she had been weeping, and a little handkerchief, suspiciously moist, clutched in her left hand. Her name was not really Valencia, you know. That was actually a shortened version of her true name, which was Benevolencia, from which you can judge the sweetness of her disposition and the warmth of her heart.

She said, "Oh, Uncle George," and she paused to gurgle a bit, as the words stuck in her throat.

I was not her uncle in the genetic sense, but if she considered me an uncle, I was bound to consider her my niece, and with the natural affection I would have for any incredibly beautiful young woman bearing such a relationship, I put my arm about her waist, and let her weep softly on my shoulder, while I soothed her with a gentle kiss or two.

"It's Cambyses," she said, at last.

"Surely," I said, a nameless fear tugging at my chest, "He has not forgotten himself and made any suggestions—"

"Oh, no," she said, her large, blue eyes opening wide. "*I* make all the suggestions. It's just that—well, he is *so* nice."

"Of course, and handsome and intelligent and charming and with a keen sense of humor—"

"Oh, yes, Uncle George, oh, yes. All that and more."

"In that case, dear little Valencia, what is it that is making you weep? An overdose of joy?"

"Not really. You see, Uncle George, I don't know if you've ever noticed it, but Cambyses is always just a little bit drunk."

"Is he?" I looked blank. I had always been with him under convivial conditions, at which times he *was* drunk, but then so was everybody. Even I, myself, having had a very few drinks; was usually in a rather pleasant humor, as any barmaid would be willing to testify. "Surely, on those occasions, when he—"

"No, Uncle George," she said, gently. "There are no occasions when it is not so. He is *always* just a little bit drunk." She sighed. "And, of course, when I say 'a little bit drunk,' I mean he is quite drunk. In fact, mostly stinking drunk."

"I cannot believe it."

"Just the same, I cannot endure it. Do you think, Uncle George, since you are such an impressive figure of rectitude and dignity, that you could perhaps speak to Cambyses and persuade him that wine is a mocker and

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that he should drink fresh, wholesome water, with perhaps an occasional Perrier at times of great hilarity."

"Granted," I said, dubiously, "that I am a model of rectitude and dignity, I don't know if I can persuade Cambyses—"

At this point, Valencia's mouth opened, her handkerchief moved to her eyes and I know she was a microsecond removed from howling her grief. So I said, "But I will try, little one. I will do my best."

I did see Cambyses in consequence. It was the first time I had ever visited him at his home. In fact, it was the first time I had ever seen him alone and without the presence of a roystering throng, all of whom were steadily consuming spirituous liquor of varying degrees of potency.

I suppose I had, therefore, an instinctive expectation that I would meet up with a grave and serious Cambyses, for it is not for nothing that those who are grave and serious are characterized by the adjective "sober."

But I was quite wrong. It was the same merry Cambyses I was accustomed to. As I stepped into his room, he laughed loudly and clapped me on the shoulder by way of a hearty greeting.

"My pal," he said. "My buddy. What are you doing without a drink in your hand? You look naked. Come, let me correct that vile omission."

And he forced a small whiskey on me. It was a little early for such dissipation but it would have been unkind of me to refuse. I tossed it off and, as I did so, I thought of all the times when he had stood me a drink, and of all those other times when he had refused to let me stand him a drink but had stood me another. He was, if you like, one of nature's noblemen in that respect.

He was also, now that Valencia had opened my eyes, one of nature's drunks. Although it was early afternoon and he was alone, there was a distinct weave to his steps, a pronounced glaze to his eyes, a definite vagueness to his smile, and an emphatic touch of alcoholic fragrance in the air—especially when he exhaled.

I said, "Cambyses, my friend, I come to you on behalf of that excellent young creature, Valencia Judd."

He said, "Nature's noblewoman; a beautiful and virtuous goddess. I drink to her."

"No," I said, urgently, "don't drink to her. That is the root of the problem. She has the feeling you drink to her too often and to everything else, indiscriminately, as well. She wishes you to cease."

He stared at me owlishly. "She has never said so to me."

"I suspect that, cowed by your manifold good qualities, she has hesitated to hurt your feelings by pointing out your one small fault, your one tiny misdemeanor, your one minuscule flaw—the fact that you are a drunken bum."

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"Just because I take a tiny sip of something for medicinal purposes on rare occasions?"

"The sips are not tiny, Cambyses, nor the occasions rare, nor the reasons medicinal, though the rest of your statement I accept. Therefore, though Valencia did not say so directly, she wishes you to understand that lips that touch liquor are likely to touch hers only at infrequent intervals."

"But it's too late, George, old boy, old friend. My lips touch liquor. I can't deny it."

"They are pickled in it, Cambyses. Can you not cease? Can you not turn away from this dreadful habit and bathe in the pure sun of sobriety as you once did?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "When did I once do?"

"Start now."

He poured himself another drink, and put it to his lips. "George," he said, "have you ever thought what a stinking, miserable hell-hole the world is?"

"Frequently," I said.

"Have you never wanted to change it into a fine, warm, delightful paradise?"

"Often," I said.

"I've done it. I've discovered the secret. A few drinks, the merest imbibing of the friendly warmth of gin, or rum, or brandy or—or any of a number of drinks of the sort—and the grim misery of this Earth, melts and dissolves. Tears are changed to laughter, sour looks to smiles, the welkin rings with song. Come, come, am I to give up all this?"

"Some of it. When Valencia is looking, at least."

"I cannot. Not even for Valencia. My duty is to humanity and to the world. Can I allow society to sink back into the foulness that would characterize it were it not for the alchemy of alcohol?"

"But the alchemy you speak of is subjective. It shows its effect only in your mind. It has no real existence."

"George," said Cambyses, solemnly, "you are a dear and beloved friend, so I cannot order you out of my house. But I intend to do it anyway. Out of my house!"

As you know, old man, if I have a failing it is that of having an incredible soft heart. I would never consent to these meals I consume at your expense, for instance, were I not concerned over your obvious need for stimulating company. It means that I must suffer yours, but what of that?

In any case, my heart was aching for Valencia and I felt it was a case for Azazel, my two-centimeter friend from another plane of existence.

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This being— Oh, have I told you about him? —Very well, there is no need to sigh melodramatically.

For once, Azazel was not annoyed at being called up. He was delighted. At least, he said he was.

He was dancing around, making peculiar gestures with his tiny hands, the details of which I could not make out. "How triply fortunate for him that you called me here," he said in his squeaky little voice. "I would have sepotulated him. I would have flaxated his modinem. I would have—"

"You would have done this to whom?" I asked with mild interest. "And for what reason?"

Azazel said, with an attempt at dignity quite incompatible with his squeaky voice and tiny size, "He addressed me in terms no gentlebeing would use to another, the big sasquam."

I let him cool down. Being a small object on his own world as on ours, he was forever being stepped on and tripped over, which was a good thing, for it was his forever-bruised ego that made him willing to help me. He had a great need to demonstrate his powers.

I said, "A friend of mine is an alcoholic."

"Ah," said Azazel. "He creeps into holes with alcos. What are alcos?"

"No, no. Alcohol is an organic fluid that acts as a stimulant in small doses, but as a mental disorienter in large. My friend is incapable of refraining from large doses."

For a moment, Azazel looked puzzled. Then, "Ah, you mean a 'phosphotonic.' "

"A phosphotonic?" I said, rather puzzled, I admit.

Azazel explained. "People on my world enjoy phosphatones of one sort or another. We sniff phosphine, drink a variety of phosphate solutions, lap up phosphopyruvic acid and so on." Azazel shuddered. "Carried to excess it is a vile habit, but I have found that a little bit of phosphorylized ammonia taken after meals is an excellent digestive aid. Hence our proverb, 'Take a little phospham for your stomach's sake.' " Azazel rubbed his BB-shaped abdomen and licked his red lips with a small red tongue.

I said, "The question is: how to cure my alcoholic friend and induce him to lay off the sauce?"

"Lay off the—"

"I mean cease drinking in and out of season."

"That is easy," said Azazel. "It is child's play to a being of my technological attainments. I need merely so alter the taste centers of his brain as to make alcohol taste to him like something vile—excrement, perhaps."

"No," I said. "Absolutely not. That is going too far. A rational amount

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of alcoholic intake, such as the amount in which I indulge myself, scarcely a quart a day, is invigorating and no one should be deprived of that. In the excellence of your wisdom, O Mighty Vastness, think of something else."

"Well," said Azazel, "is there any way in which drinking alcohol can be made into a virtue? Are there drinkers who are admired?"

"There are connoisseurs," I said, after some thought. "There are people who are very knowledgeable about drinks, and can distinguish those of high quality. They are usually treated with great admiration."

"Your friend is not one of these? He does not distinguish between high quality and low?"

"Good lord, no. He'll drink bathtub gin, hair tonic, shoe polish, antifreeze. It is astonishing that nothing seems to kill him outright."

"Well, there you are, then, I shall so alter the sense-receptors of his brain that he will be able to distinguish between any two varieties, however closely allied, and tell the superior. He will no longer be considered an alcoholic to be despised but a connoisseur to be admired. —Actually, I have this connoisseurish quality with regard to our own phosphatones and have frequently struck large assemblages with awe at my ability—"

He went on and on in excruciating detail, but I listened, if not gladly, then with patience, so eager was I to help Cambyses.

I visited Cambyses some time afterward when I thought that he had gotten over the spleen with which he had ordered me from his digs. I found I had nothing to fear. Alcoholics are merry spirits who never remember the evanescent angers and petulances of the past—or anything else, either.

Not that Cambyses looked much like a merry spirit. He sat on the floor surrounded by a sea of shotglasses, filled with liquids of different appearances. On his face was a look of settled melancholy.

I said, in alarm, "Cambyses, what is wrong?"

"I scarcely know," said Cambyses, "but I have apparently become aware of the shortcomings of these items. Here, George, try this."

It was a tawny port of considerable power, as a slight sip showed me. I said, "Very good, old man."

He said, "Very good? Are you serious? It is deficient in fruitiness!"

"I hadn't noticed," I said.

"You wouldn't," he said, insultingly. "Nor is it as mellow as it should be. You weren't aware of an inappropriate sharpness?"

"Not at all."

Cambyses closed his eyes and shook his head as though overcome with faintness at having witnessed my obtuseness. He said, "About the best thing I could find in my collection is this one. Try this."

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It was a cherry heering of surpassing excellence. I almost cried aloud at the magnificence of its bouquet and the delicacy of its taste. "Magnificent," I said in awe.

"Barely tolerable," he said. "I admit the idiots meant well, but somewhere in the preparation, the fluid passed over a rusty nailhead. There is a not-quite-overpowering but definitely unpleasant metallic taste to it."

"I noticed no such thing," I said indignantly.

"That's because you wouldn't notice a unicorn if it jabbed you in your fat behind," he replied coarsely.

I could no longer fail to notice the ill-nature of his taunts and these forced me to observe a characteristic I had never before associated with my young friend.

"Cambyses," I said, "surely you are sober."

He looked up at me with a snarl. "What do you expect? I have nothing here I can bear to drink. It is all dishwater and poison."

It was strange, I acknowledged to myself in the months that followed. Azazel had not so reoriented Cambyses' sense-perceptions so to make all alcoholic drinks taste like excrement. Azazel had instead simply given Cambyses a sense of discrimination of superlative delicacy and in his search for an unattainable ideal, Cambyses acted as though any drink that fell short of that ideal (that is, *all* of them) tasted like excrement.

Cambyses became not merely sober, he became a very model of sobriety. He walked stiffly upright, cultivated an austere glance, went to bed early, woke early, adopted habits of distressing regularity and was stern to the point of captiousness toward anyone who deviated from the paths of rigid virtue in the slightest. To him, all normal human behavior resembled drinks of insufficient fruitness and metallic taste.

My dear young niece, Valencia, was woebegone. She was wrenching at a sopping wet handkerchief, and her face was blotched.

"Cambyses is, as you wished," I pointed out, "sober."

"Cold sober," she said. "Frigidly sober. Liquid-air sober. Yes, that is as it should be." She blubbered a bit, then seized hold of her emotions and said, "His post in his father's financial firm, until now a sinecure, has become a showcase for his talents. He is known as the 'tyrannosaur of Wall Street.' He is widely admired as the epitome of American financial enterprise, and crowds gather to watch him grind the faces of widows and orphans. The deftness with which he does it elicits unbounded applause and has won him a citation from the Secretary of the Treasury."

"How proud you must be," I said.

"Proud, indeed. His merciless virtue is admired by all, and his eloquent denunciation of lying, theft, and connivery, except when these charac-

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teristics are necessary for the gathering of corporate profits, are cheered to the echo. And yet—"

"And yet?"

"He has grown cold to me, Uncle George."

"Cold? Surely you jest. You are as virtuous as he."

"Oh, every bit," she admitted. "I am a solid mass of virtue. And yet—for some reason—I no longer seem to satisfy him."

I went to see Cambyses. It was not easy. So attentive was he now to business that he found twelve hours a day insufficient to the dedication he brought to his task of bilking the public by overcharging the Department of Defense for toothpicks and bottlecaps. He was therefore surrounded by secretaries, assistants, and aides-de-camp whom it took all my skill and address to evade.

I finally made my way into his large office, and found him scowling at me. He had aged quite a bit, for the essence of sobriety that now consumed him had etched vertical furrows in his cheeks and turned those once bright and sparkling eyes into the hard opacity of marble.

He said, "What in Tophet do you want, George?"

"I come, my friend," I said, "on behalf of your loved one, Valencia?"

"My what one, who?"

I had to admit that was a bad sign. "Valencia," I said. "Blonde little girl so high, beautiful, virtuous, and made to be loved."

"Oh, yes." Cambyses picked up a glass of water from his desk, frowned at it and put it back. "I seem to remember her. She won't do, George."

"Why ever not? She has been acclaimed as utterly lovable by some of the finest experts in the field."

"Finest experts, bah! Incompetent bunglers! George, that woman makes use of perfume that would sicken a muskrat. Toward the end of the day, despite the perfume, I detect an unpleasant body odor. Her breath is frequently appallingly rancid. She has a tendency to eat Swiss cheese, sardines, and other items that linger on her tongue and teeth. Am I expected to bathe myself in this foul effluvium? For that matter, George, you yourself have neglected to bathe this morning, I perceive."

"No such thing, Cambyses," I replied hotly. "I bathed."

"In that case, stand closer to the soap next time," he said. "You needn't tell Valencia the details if you think it will offend her—as it certainly offends me. But you may tell her that if she ever sees me, she must remain downwind."

"This is ridiculous, Cambyses," I said. "Valencia is a dainty and sweet-smelling young lady. You will not find anything better."

"No," said Cambyses, his face growing grimmer. "I expect not. This is a filthy and rancid world. I am astonished that people do not notice."

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"Has it occurred to you that you, yourself, might be imperfect in this regard."

He lifted one wrist and sniffed at it. "No," he said, "it has not."

"That can only be because your senses are saturated with your own odor. To others, you are probably offensive."

"To others? What on earth do I care about others?"

Which, I had to admit to myself, was an unanswerable point.

Cambyses lifted the glass of water again, sipped at it, made an appalling face, and said, "I can detect at least five organic chemicals of noisome taste that have been added to this water. Even bottled spring water has a siliceous tang owing to the traces of glass that it dissolves."

I sighed and left. The case was hopeless. Azazel, in giving him a nice discrimination of the senses, had overdone it.

I tried to break the news to Valencia gently. She blubbered, squealed and keened dreadfully. It took me three days and nights to console her, and it was a difficult task, for some of my spring had been sprung in recent years and you can't imagine how much consolation that woman needed.

As for Cambyses, the last I heard of him, he was searching the world for a place to live where the air and water were sufficiently pure for his refined palate, for a cook who could meet his exacting needs and, most of all, a young woman who would not offend his delicate nose. He is as rich as you would expect a defense contracter to be—his low-quality, high-cost equipment is the pride of the armed forces of our glorious nation—but I suspect he's not happy.

George heaved a vinous sigh of commiseration and tossed off his fifth goblet of white wine.

I was furious. I said, "I thought you said wine is a mocker."

"So it is. Not its presence, of course, but its absence."

"I deny that." I had rarely been so annoyed with the man. "I am always prepared for the peculiar attitude toward life that these very dubious reminiscences of yours portray, but I draw the line at this one. I deny that a sober man, simply because he is sober, develops all the evil characteristics you ascribe to this Cambyses you speak of."

"You do?" said George, sounding astonished. "What possible evidence can you have to the contrary?"

"Well, for one thing, *I* am a teetotaler."

"I rest my case," said George. ●

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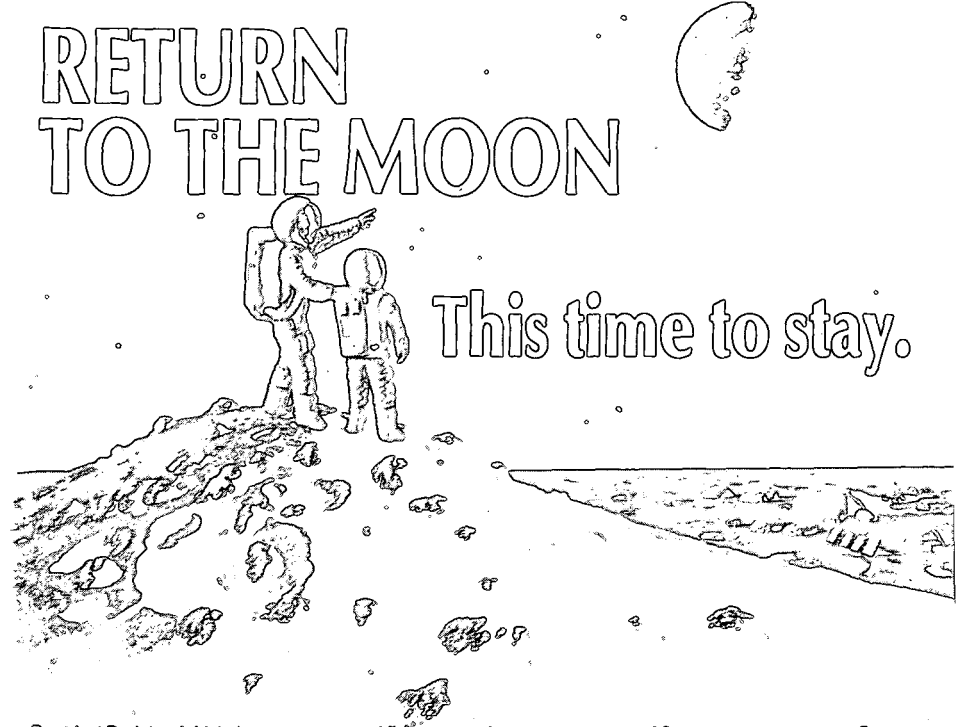
RETURN TO THE MOON



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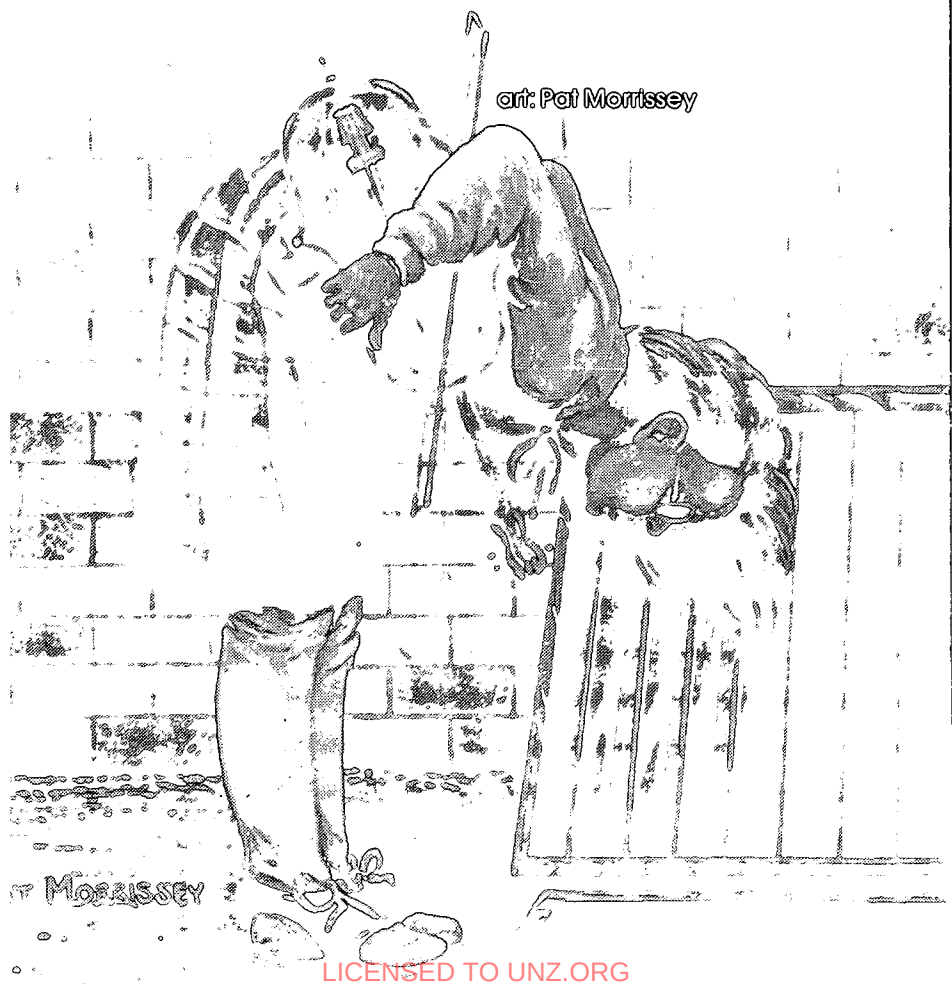
THE RECITAL

by Nancy Sterling

The author of this bittersweet tale was born and raised in Texas. She tells us "The Recital" is a product of her participation in the Turkey City Writers' Workshop. It is also her first sale.

art: Pat Morrissey



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Margaret was eleven and played the violin, which was okay, for popularity had already passed her by. It was 1964. She had frizzy hair and blue glasses with silver speckles, she was chubby, and she was smart. So twice a week after school and Saturdays (during cartoons) she took music lessons with the University Junior String Project. Margaret was on her eighth teacher, Mr. Allen. He called her technique "lumberjack."

It was Tuesday afternoon. Margaret stood in front of the Music Building. Three stories, white limestone, balconies of wrought iron, red Spanish tile roof, little gables. Margaret thought the building was the finest in the world. She climbed granite steps to the entranceway and pulled open the heavy wooden door. The cracked leather handle of her violin case was sharp against her palm. Margaret felt guilty. Last Thursday during her études Mr. Allen had said a bad word. He'd slammed the piano shut, kept his face turned away, and asked her to please go. She'd really meant to practice since then.

The inside smelled of resin and air conditioning. The proctor's table was empty. Margaret pressed her cheek and hand against the cool limestone wall. Her fingers explored the fossil imprint of a scallop, then traced the coil of a snail. The walls of the Music Building were made of big ancient slices of the ocean and Margaret loved the ocean. She knew this part of Texas had once been the bottom of the sea and she liked to think of her house and the city covered with water. Margaret had never been to the sea, but she had waded in the Gulf of Mexico and that water had touched the Atlantic Ocean. Her parents let her keep an aquarium with live sea monkeys.

Margaret's glasses clicked on the stone as she peered around the corner for the proctor. The proctor looked like Lee Harvey Oswald and scratched his nose with both hands, like a hamster. She saw him standing at the west end of the building in the lobby of the recital hall. He was talking to a man in a suit.

Margaret signed herself in, then went through French doors to the central stairwell. She passed Clara, the housekeeper, on the second floor landing. Clara always climbed the stairs one step at a time. Margaret looked sideways at Clara's legs. They were like tree trunks covered with tan support hose and stuffed into black industrial shoes. Margaret had decided the housekeeper had elephantiasis, like the poor people in India. Clara always wore the same black dress and coiled her colorless hair in a braid around the back of her head.

The third floor was paneled in wood, gold like SueBee honey. The hall was lined with practice cubicles: tiny, windowless rooms each with its own piano. The rooms were sound-proof, but the halls were usually filled with stray toots and squeaks, and muffled voices going for high C. Today, silence.

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Mr. Allen's cubicle was empty and the light was on. Her teacher's violin case was open; the green velvet lining exposed. His violin had been smashed against the corner of the upright piano. It was shattered; pieces everywhere. Mr. Allen's composition book was wadded on the floor at her feet. Margaret picked it up and tried to smooth the pages.

"Hey, kid!" Big hands pulled her from the room. "You're not supposed to be in there."

Margaret squirmed free and turned to face a blue shirt, leather belt, and the wooden butt of a gun. A policeman frowned down at her. Behind him, Margaret saw more policemen and the man in the suit come up the stairs. They turned and filed into the ladies' room.

Margaret made the chiding noise, "Ah-um!"

The policeman grinned. "It's okay, they'll close their eyes. Now, what were you doing in that room?"

"I had a lesson, but I didn't break it. I swear—"

"Mr. Allen your teacher?"

"Yes sir, but it was like that when I—"

"I know, kid." The policeman put his hand on her shoulder. "Look, uh—something bad's happened to your teacher. Real bad. I'm afraid he's not going to teach your lesson today."

Margaret closed her eyes and saw the smashed violin. She opened her eyes and the hall seemed smaller. The policeman had knelt on one knee and his big face was across from hers. He smelled like limes.

"What happened?" she said.

"He—fell off the recital hall roof. That's why my buddies had to go through the, uh, powder room. Seems the little window in there is the only way onto the roof." His big face blushed and he stood.

"What was Mr. Allen doing—"

"Ah, look, you didn't touch anything in the room did you?"

The paper of Mr. Allen's composition book crumpled loudly as she pressed it against her chest. "No sir."

"Well, you better go call your mother. And kid, I'm sorry about your teacher."

Margaret lay in her bed and thought about her dead teacher. She had a flashlight in one hand and the stolen composition book in the other. Her face was lit by the green glow of the aquarium. The sea monkeys were clustered on their plastic dinette set.

Margaret had seen Mr. Allen. She'd run down the east stairs and around the back of the building and had seen them put Mr. Allen on the stretcher. His head had been twisted around and there'd been blood on his mouth and he'd had a magnolia branch in his hand. She'd heard the ambulance man say suicide and had known the policeman had fibbed.

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Mr. Allen had jumped off the recital hall roof and broken his neck under the magnolia tree.

Margaret had been through the little window many times. She'd thought the gravel rooftop with the big limestone urns was her secret.

She heard her parents' bedroom door shut. She got her glasses from the bedside table and turned on the flashlight. She had seen the composition book before. But now it was the book of a dead man. The black pebbly cover had a white label:

Sonata in D Minor for Violin
R. Allen
9/23/62—

She opened the book. On the first page a dedication was written in faded blue ink: "To Catherine." This was crossed through with black ink and below it was written: "To whom it may concern." On the next page Mr. Allen had started the first movement of the sonata. He'd composed in pencil then had filled in the final notes with blue ink. Messages had been scribbled in the margins. Most concerned the music, but a lot were about his girlfriend. Mr. Allen had written mushy things and some bad poetry. Margaret knew it was bad because it didn't rhyme.

Mr. Allen had taken a long time to finish the first movement. On June 15, 1964, he had written:

It is done. Cathy, wilt thou be mine?

Margaret giggled. Mr. Allen had started the second movement in black ink on September 5, 1964. "Larghetto" was written across the top of the page. That meant kind of slow. Sideways across three lined staffs, he had scrawled:

> Must I lose my music, too? The silence in my head echoes the emptiness in my heart. I am alone. All is shit.

Margaret snuggled under the covers. This was great!

The next page was dated September 16. One month ago. There were three measures pencilled lightly on the top staff. Below that Mr. Allen had written:

> Will-o-wisp—faint theme in the back of my head—teasing me. Three in the morning—Music Building a tomb.

That was the last dated entry. Margaret counted six pages, front and back, all filled with the repeated bit of song. Then, more writing:

> I heard my song in the hallway tonight—all around me. Coming from the walls. She sings me my own song.

Mr. Allen's handwriting had turned backwards and loopy; it made Margaret feel bad. On the next page he had inked in the completed theme and written funny words above the notes.

Margaret hummed the tune softly, and the sea monkeys gathered against the glass. She turned the page.

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I found her long moonlit hair high
above me shining eyes hands reaching
out breasts bare Damn wall—bloody
hands

That was the last entry. Margaret closed the book and slipped it under the mattress. She looked knowingly at the stuffed poodle at the foot of her bed.

"Mr. Allen went crazy," she whispered.

Margaret kept her secret. She named the piece "Mr. Allen's Lament" and learned to play it on her violin. She burned the book in a pile of leaves in the backyard. The project assigned her to a new teacher, a cello major, and Margaret's style began its ninth variation. She was promoted to intermediate orchestra: last chair, second violin.

In late December, after a Thursday lesson, Margaret waited for her mother in the entrance hall of the Music Building. Her mother was late, the proctor had gone, and Margaret was alone. She left her violin on the marble bench and went to the central stairwell to use the pay phone. No one answered at her house so she used the returned dime to buy some Bit-O-Honey from the vending machine. She stripped the paper from the first sticky piece and popped it in her mouth.

Faintly, echoing down from above, a voice began to sing. Margaret stopped in mid-chew; the candy bulged in her cheek. The voice was singing "Mr. Allen's Lament." Margaret choked down the candy and put the rest in the pocket of her jumper. She started up the stairs; she had to find out who knew her secret.

Margaret went to the third floor. The singer trilled on a high note and Margaret's hair prickled. Margaret turned right. The ladies' room door was propped open with a mop. She peeked inside; the lounging couch had a black dress laying on it. The singing stopped and Margaret saw movement around the corner of the marble stalls. The little window was shut; it was getting dark outside. Margaret took three brave steps into the room and looked around the corner.

A woman sat on the stool in front of the vanity. She wore tight green sequined slacks and was naked from the waist up. Margaret could see her breasts in the mirror; they were full and white with little pink centers. Margaret had never seen grown-up breasts before. The woman's arms were lifted; she took a pin from her hair and a long thin braid uncoiled from the back of her head.

"Come to gawk, have you?" The woman turned to face her and Margaret jumped. It was Clara, the housekeeper.

"You're one of the String Project brats, eh?" Clara reached into an open sardine can on the vanity and put a smelly little fish into her mouth.

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She poked at Margaret's stomach with oily fingers. "Kind of piggy, aren't you—but nice hair. You want to comb out Clara's hair?"

Margaret nodded and the housekeeper put something in her hand. It was a comb made of mother-of-pearl and inlaid with tiny blue shells. Clara loosened the braid with her fingers and Margaret ran the comb through the colorless strands. She looked over Clara's shoulder and saw her thick green legs stuck in a steaming bucket of water; the support hose and black shoes had been shoved under the vanity.

Margaret handed her the comb and said, "I've got to go now."

"Oh?" Clara had her by the wrist. "I wanted to show you something."

Margaret pulled loose from her grip.

Clara lifted her dripping legs from the bucket. Instead of feet she had crumpled, swollen fins rolled up like cigars. Margaret saw that the shimmering sequins were scales—fish scales. She took a step back. She could feel the couch behind her and she sat down. She had seen pictures of women like Clara but her mind was slow to produce the word. Mermaid, that was it; Clara was a mermaid, only her fishtail had been split up the middle. Margaret whimpered and Clara began to sing. The sound filled Margaret's mouth and ears and eyes with warm salty water and she began to drown.

Margaret heard honking and opened her eyes. She was on the marble bench next to her violin; she could see her mother's car through the glass panel in the door. On the drive home Margaret convinced herself that it had been a dream. Later, in her bedroom, she took off her jumper and the unfinished Bit-O-Honey fell onto the floor.

She picked up the candy and showed it to the stuffed dog.

"It happened," she said. Red felt lips smiled back in eternal agreement. She placed the candy next to the aquarium and put her hands against the cold glass.

"A mermaid in the Music Building, Mr. Sea Monkey." A tiny plastic chest at the bottom of the tank opened and released three pearls of air. "Oh jeez," she whispered. The pieces came together in a rush. The limestone. The limestone with the fossilized shells. The Music Building was made with big slabs of dead ocean—Clara's ocean, her territory, her home. Mr. Allen had heard Clara's song, like the sailors and the Lorelei. He'd tried to reach her by climbing the magnolia tree. Mr. Allen loved Clara, but she'd lured him to his death because that's what mermaids do.

Saturday morning Margaret was dropped off at the Music Building for theory, orchestra, and recital. Her theory class was on the first floor. Afterwards she saw Clara mopping in the lobby of the recital hall. Margaret went to the second floor for orchestra. Room 200 was in the west

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wing. From her seat in the back she could look out the window and see the withered leaves of the magnolia tree.

A boy in front of Margaret turned in his chair. His name was Leonard and he belted his pants too high. He whispered behind his hand, "You the one who drove Mr. Allen to suicide?"

Margaret bounced her bow off Leonard's head; resin puffed from his hair and a violist laughed out loud. The conductor tapped his baton on his music stand then pointed it at Margaret.

"I shall have to ask you to leave, young lady."

"Yes, sir." Margaret put her violin in her case; the clasps clicked loudly in the ritual silence. She gave Leonard a squinty-eyed glare and left the room. She had forty minutes before recital. Margaret left her violin in the hall and went to find the mermaid's lair.

The third floor ladies' room looked like it always did. Margaret cranked open the window and climbed through. The flat, gravel rooftop sparkled white in the December sun. She crunched to the limestone railing and looked at the top of the magnolia tree. She saw where the branch had been broken off. She held out her hand as Clara might have done, then pulled it back, laughing. In slow motion she pictured Mr. Allen reaching out, losing his balance, scrabbling at the tree, and then falling away from her, betrayal in his eyes.

Margaret turned and looked around the roof. There were pipes and metal things all over and a grid which covered an air vent. She walked to the rusty grid and looked down the metal shaft. It dropped about three feet and disappeared to the north. A single spider's strand was caught on the grid and floated in the updraft. Margaret caught the strand in her hand. It was long and silvery—like Clara's hair! She opened the grid, got on hands and knees, and poked her face inside. The waft of air carried a faint odor of fish.

"Oh boy," Margaret said and sat back. She swung her legs over the edge; gravel had ripped a hole in her white tights and made red dents on her knee. She dropped into the shaft and pulled the grid closed.

The tunnel north was round and about a yard across. Twenty feet away Margaret could see light shining up, then the tunnel continued into darkness. She crawled to the light; the fishy smell got stronger. The light came from a ventilation fan in the ceiling of the recital hall. Margaret peered down at the red velvet seats and the hardwood stage. A huge organ occupied one quarter of the stage and its tall brass pipes lined the back wall. Four music stands were ready for the recital. A boring quartet, Margaret thought. Margaret had her own recital scheduled for next week. Once she got to intermediate orchestra she'd had no choice. Margaret saw a few of the younger kids already wandering in; she hurried on past the opening.

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After another twenty feet the shaft dropped away, then doubled back in a downward slant. Margaret thought she could brace herself on the sides and scoot down far enough to look for more light. She was wrong. She slid; friction burned her palms, her petticoat saved the rest. She popped out into dim light and landed on a mountain of small square pillows. They were satin souvenir pillows with black fringe and little pictorials. Margaret read them as she dug her way out: Galveston Island—1911, Visit Sunny Galveston—1962, Galvez Hotel, Galveston Centennial—1936, and one Port Isabel—1938.

Margaret stood and looked around. She was in a high-ceilinged room behind the row of giant brass organ pipes. The walls were striped with silvery light streaming from the recital hall. The floor was littered with sardine cans and romance magazines. Margaret spotted a chest in a dark corner. She ran to it and found an empty tuna crate; a blond mermaid smiled at her from the label. Margaret also found a pile of dirty black dresses next to a neat stack of clean ones, about thirty packages of support hose in a brown paper bag, and a jumbo jar of Jergen's skin cream.

She could hear the mumble of voices on the other side of the pipes; the recital was about to begin. Margaret looked for an exit. The back wall and the wall to the right of the pipes were made of limestone. The wall to the left was paneled in wood and had a staircase leading to a catwalk at the top of the pipes. Halfway up the stairs Margaret saw a small door. It was open; Clara stood there. Her eyes were shiny like an animal's in a headlight glare. She closed the door behind her and hobbled down the stairs.

"You come down the chute?" she said.

Margaret nodded. There was a sudden hush from the recital hall and Clara put her finger to her lips. She pointed to the pillows and whispered, "Go sit." Margaret did as she was told and the quartet began to play.

"Bach," Clara said. She pinched her nose shut and Margaret giggled. Clara unbuttoned the top of her dress, slipped it off her arms, and let it hang around her hips. She wore no underwear and Margaret could see the green scalloped line of her scales. Clara limped to the jar of skin cream and began to smear her shoulders and arms. She brought the jar with her and sat on the pillows with a backward plop. She coiled her mutilated tail; the black shoes rested at a funny angle.

"So the little piglet has become a fat ferret, eh?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am." Margaret wondered what a ferret was.

"You liked what I showed you—not scared?"

"Uh-uh, it was neat." Margaret paused. "Ma'am, may I touch them—your scales?"

Clara undid a few more buttons and bared a shimmering haunch.

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Margaret touched her; the scales were warm and dry, the faint bumps ticklish to Margaret's palm.

Muffled applause came through the pipes. Then a scraping of chairs.

"How did it happen?" Margaret said. "I mean your, ah, legs. Was it for love like in the story?"

Clara gave a snort. "It's the drying does it, girl, not men. We don't come equipped for love."

"Huh?"

"Sex. Like in the magazines. We spawn. It's funny when you think about it. All those men—just bones on the bottom of the sea. It's knowledge they're after, but that's not what they feel. They feel desire. Desire just out of reach; just on the next rock up."

"Well, how come you dried then? How come you're here?"

"Damn fishermen."

"You got caught in a net? Wow."

"Net, hell," Clara said. She stretched her neck to the light and traced her finger along a white jagged scar. "Big ol' nasty hook."

"Oh . . . " Margaret said. "How awful."

"Yeah, awful. Couldn't sing. Couldn't hardly breathe. Fishermen thought I was dead. They kept saying 'Diablo, diablo.' I wanted to be dead."

"What happened?"

"Sold me to a carny. Hauled me around Texas in that stinking wagon, seemed like forever. After a while my voice came back. I got away."

On the other side of the pipes a cello began to play solo.

"Then what?" Margaret said.

"It's Debussy, shhh." Clara lay back, arms stretched over her head, and began to hum along.

Margaret lay back and stretched her arms over her head. Dust motes sparkled in the shafts of light. She pretended they were underwater and that she had a fish's tail.

"You want a sardine?" Clara had gotten a can from the floor and was rolling back the lid with the little key.

The cellist finished and was replaced by a sour violin duet. Clara made another funny face and they laughed. Margaret picked out a sardine.

"So did you go back to the sea?"

"Yeah, I went back."

"So what happened?"

"Did you ever find a baby bird on the ground and try and put it back with its mother?"

"No, why? What happens?"

"You know, you sure ask a lot of questions," Clara said. She offered

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the can again. "You can have one more sardine and one more question. One more, so think about it."

"Okay," Margaret said. She took a sardine and munched silently for a moment. "Okay. Here it is. It's about the singing. I don't get it. Why do you do it? I mean what's it for—the luring and stuff."

"We don't sing to lure sailors. It's the song itself. The song is the thing. The sailors were just," Clara waved the sardine can, "by-products."

"So you weren't actually luring Mr. Allen? He just—"

Clara turned her head sharply and looked hard into Margaret's eyes.

"Oh, no!" Margaret said.

"What do you know?" Clara grabbed Margaret by the shoulders and shook her. "What do you know about that man?"

"Nothing!" Margaret said. "I mean, he was my teacher, I found the notebook, but I'd never *tell!*"

"Keep your voice down," Clara hissed. She gave Margaret another shake. "I thought you were my friend."

"Oh, I *am* Clara. I *am* your—"

"No you're not. You're a spy. A dirty little spy, a dirty little human grub."

Margaret started to cry. Clara drew her close and began to sing right in her ear with hot whispering fishy breath. Margaret felt herself go under.

She opened her eyes. The proctor stood over her; he held a clipboard and his lips were pinched together. She sat in the back row of the recital hall. The brass pipes were a mile away; the red velvet chairs all empty.

"Humph," he said, "I have you down as absent."

Margaret had a miserable week. She didn't see Clara on Tuesday or Thursday and the grating on the recital hall roof was closed with a giant padlock. Saturday morning she woke up knowing she faced a Vivaldi solo in front of the whole String Project. She thought about pretending to be sick but then remembered the treat for Clara she had saved from last night's dinner.

An hour later she was in theory class with a salmon croquette rolled securely in her sheet music. Margaret had decided to skip orchestra. If she couldn't find Clara, she would use the time to practice her neglected Vivaldi. The class was dismissed and Maragaret hurried to the third floor. She went into a practice cubicle and unwrapped the croquette. The Vivaldi was greasy but still readable. She sawed her way through the first few measures. The recital was going to be bad. Margaret opened the door and peeked out. She heard the clanging of a mop bucket down the hall. She grabbed the croquette and ran toward the restroom. She met Clara coming out.

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"Out of my way," Clara said, "I've got work to do."

"Please, I'm *sorry*. Please be my friend. I'd never tell anyone." Margaret held out her gift. "See what I brought you?"

"I'm just the cleaning lady," Clara said.

"No, you're *wonderful,* you're a mermaid! You can do stuff! You can breath water and swim in the coral and wear shell things—"

"I'm the cleaning lady. I mop floors and clean toilets. Give it up, girl. Leave me alone."

"But I want to *know!*"

"Yeah, that's what you all want," Clara said. "But you can't."

The house lights were left bright for recitals. Margaret could see each glum pasty face lined up for the torture. She smelled fish from her sheet music and the stuffy nausea of humiliation filled her stomach. The pianist was waiting for her nod. Sweat dripped down her face and glued the violin to her chin and neck.

She placed her index finger on the A string and pressed the wire into her skin. I hate them, she thought. I hate them all. Margaret launched into "Mr. Allen's Lament." The pianist jumped in after her and the audience laughed as the Vivaldi clashed against Margaret's notes. Margaret played louder. The pianist banged on the keys and told her to stop. Margaret played alone. The laughter dropped to an uneasy murmur.

Margaret reached a high note and she wiggled her hand for vibrato. She sounded pretty good! Then she felt it. The control. She *had* them. This was wonderful. Are you listening, Clara? Come to me, she thought. Come hear what I have to play.

Leonard rose from the front row and hitched his pants a little higher. He pulled himself onto the stage and came toward her, his mouth hanging open. He was followed by two other sweaty boys and a teenaged girl from advanced orchestra. Then a teacher, showing a yard of white slip as she climbed the stage.

Uh-oh. Margaret stopped playing and held out her violin and bow like a sword and shield. They were coming to get her. The entire hall was coming up over the edge of the stage in a tide. This was terrible. Where were her rocks?

Leonard grabbed at her. The pianist appeared from behind her and slammed Leonard aside with his shoulder. Leonard hit the wood with a wet crack and Margaret saw blood spurt from his nose. The pianist turned to her, his eyes rolling like a crazy man.

"I stopped, I stopped! Go away!" she screamed. But the song went on without her, loud and strong, more beautiful than before. It was Clara. The pianist looked up and behind her and Margaret turned to see.

She was singing from the top of the organ pipes. Her hair floated in

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filmy strands of silk. Her tail coiled around the tallest pipe, gleaming brass fanned by glistening fins. She looked at Margaret and gave a little nod, then held out her hands to the crowd.

Margaret was shoved from behind as the people rushed past her. She struggled to stay on her feet, her eyes fixed on Clara. She was drowning again. Drowning in the song and the crowd.

Then it was over and the mermaid was gone. Everyone was looking at everyone else. Leonard sat on the stage clutching a big white handkerchief to his bloody nose. Margaret still held her violin. She tucked it under her arm and left the stage. The recital was over.

Backstage Margaret put her violin in its case and then went to the door which led to Clara's lair.

Clara was dressed again, her hair still loose. She was stuffing pillows into the tuna crate.

Margaret ran to her. She looked in the crate and saw the stack of magazines with the mother-of-pearl comb on top.

"You're leaving!"

"Yes, I'm going to the coast for a while." She smiled. "I need it now."

"But we just—"

"I'll be back."

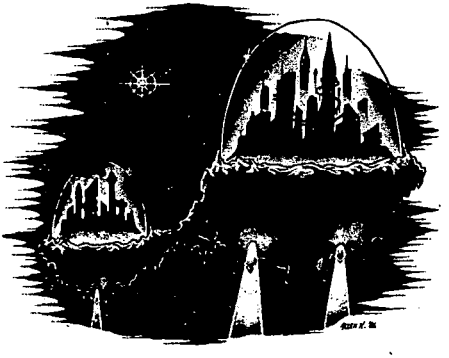
"You're taking all your stuff."

Clara reached into the trunk. "You can keep this for me until I get back. Here." She handed Margaret a *True Romance*.

Margaret clutched the magazine to her chest. "I'm going to miss you," she said.

No one remembered what Margaret did or the appearance of the mermaid. They blamed it all on Leonard. He was demoted to the elementary orchestra and Margaret was given his chair.

Margaret never saw Clara again. ●



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And these are the people.

And this is their party.

Diane has gone out to the balcony, to get air, to get a beer, to get away. From the people. From their party.

Inside the cooler are beers from Japan, beers from Mexico, beers from Australia, beers from Cincinnati. Diane knows the beers more than she does the people at the party. No, that is not true. She knows Lucy, the hostess . . . a neat lady, Earth Mother *and* Scholar. But Lucy is playing Cosmic Encounters. And Greg, her husband, he is feeding the Babystar and playing Trivial Pursuit. A few of the others she knows: from staff meetings, department meetings, the faculty lounge, the food co-op. The faculty members and their squeezes. Conversation with this lot would be like building a funeral pyre.

Too bad Julia had to go to Los Angeles, for the U.S.C. interview. Too damn bad Diane hadn't looked before backing her car out of the driveway. It's all just too bad.

She opens a Carta Blança and the head gushes from the bottle, spraying a hanging fern—balcony'll reek of beer for a week. Just too bad—

A gun goes off, in the distance. Or a car backfires. Diane is not about to go downstairs, to go down the block to find out. From inside the house: nervous laughter, calls of "Duck!" or "Phone the cops!"

On her way out, out to the balcony, Diane had heard an associate professor boring the host to death with accounts of a psychic who can read peoples' "auras," and about the time she had felt *some* presence with her in the shower—and how she'd later found out from the landlady the previous tenant died in the bathroom. What of, exactly, she'd forgotten. But the previous tenant had *died*. There. Where some presence had watched her take a shower.

Ghost stories, again.

And again. Distantly, sirens can be heard. Diane sees a police car and an ambulance coming down the street, and turning into the cul-de-sac where she parked her car. Terrific.

Smash into my car, I always park too far away from the curb.

The cops are too late anyway, Diane could tell them: Two dead, two wounded—an argument over schtupping the old lady and money owed on a coke purchase. Diane knows these things. *News at 11*. To hell with the news—her *brother* tells her. Sometimes. At times she empathically augers it herself from the aether; axons firing awareness from the void. Whether her brother assists by acting as an antenna, amplifying her empathic "gifts," is not something Diane knows for certain, or cares to know; Julia has usually been there, actually just down the hall, when push came to shove and dream came to scream. And Julia knows all sorts of shit, without ever having paid dues—she's never been raped,

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beaten, mugged, robbed, or even betrayed by a friend or relative: her family's so close, so supportive: even all of Julia's fucking *grand*parents are still alive, hale and hearty; and two great grandparents are still ticking away, counting their apostle spoons. It finally makes no real, actual difference, as Julia has told her in the cold lights of sundry dawning noons. But these visceral portents are a topographic given, just the same. All fall, crash, collapse, bleed, or plotz, at their own hands or those of others or of chance, as each is shot, or cut, stabbed, spindled, drowned or suffocated, strangled or crushed, eviscerated, decapitated or otherwise mutilated, annihilated, electrocuted or gassed, irradiated even.

Diane just *looks* at people at work, while shopping, or at play, and sometimes her brother tells how they'll die, flashes a front page photo. Other times her brother is absent—and *still* it happens, perhaps not as vividly. And other times, like last month, she is as blind as the next "normal, average" person, and blunders into a little murder by running over her roommate's puppy while backing out of the driveway. Or, like tonight, with that gunfire thing down the street.

Tonight: assorted viscera: hair, skin, bone, and blood arrayed all over upper walls and ceiling of the pantry to a rented house up the street as the top half of a guy's head is forcibly separated by a shotgun blast: the rest of him splayed in a corner—propped against the gas dryer, as if reaching for a new laundry detergent. Some of what could have been the guy's eyes or cheeks has caked to the lightbulb. Then there's a woman, a chestwound. And *some*one. Man or woman. It's hard to determine. With a machete in their back. And a toddler face down in a pool of milk and—

Some demifuckwit inside is talking about the fecal imagery in the oeuvre of Poe.

She downs the beer, feels it quench a thirst, kill a taste of ashes. She never gets an image of the killer during murder, but she works at it, hoping to help, somehow. Cold beer dribbles over her chin, then her neck, and on down to her left breast. Diane looks down and sees her nipple pert against the wet fabric.

Her brother is with her now. He likes beer. He reaches for a can of Tooth, without opening the cooler. Then he reaches for Diane's breast with his free hand, groping it, his fingers disappearing in the warm, living flesh. Diane, not amused, tries to slap her brother's hand away—but the force of her slap sinks her hand *through* his arm.

. . . Killed anyone's pets today?

Goodbye, Matt.

'S not what you said the night before I shipped out—'I don't want you to die a virgin,' you said, and while we were four on the floor you gave me some mysticoidal bullshit about how you'd dreamed my dying—

But you did *die, it happened—*

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—Not the way you said it would—

—So, your men were the enemy; I told you your enemies'd kill you.

Matt changes the subject. *When is Julia coming back, sis?*

Diane feels the acid eating her stomach away.

—Any News, Sis? Any News About Julia? Any Visions?

No, Matt. Funny about her—

Funny about who—?

—Julia, who else? I can't see her *death. Not that I try.*

That's because you two're too Platonic. You think if you don't sleep with her, she won't die?

Diane grins. *Maybe she'll live forever.*

That seems to violate any number of physical laws.

Matt, go piss up a particle accelerator.

I did, Diane, last week. They discovered a new subatomic particle.

Another police car arrives, flashing its lights, but leaving its siren turned off.

She wishes she had the courage to leave Santa Cruz, to leave her tenured perch at Cal State Aptos.

Diane hears guests, inside, speculate about the police cars.

She wonders why no one is coming out to the balcony.

True, there's no wine out here.

But she can't be the only beer drinker among fifty-odd guests.

Have you noticed the way people avoid *you, Diane—?*

She cannot think of a rejoinder.

Must be your mouthwash.

Why do ghosts have such a *ju*venile sense of humor?

An ambulance arrives, and a paramedic truck.

Drink all *the beer, sis. It'll serve 'em right.*

Again he reaches for more beer. *Show-off.* The ectoplasmic parlour tricks never cease to fill her with a sense of wonder. Sometimes she wishes that she, too, could walk through the walls.

How do you do that, Matt?

'S all done with fiber optics. He toasts her.

Diane reluctantly turns to glance, to turn away if need be.

Good, he has on his sunglasses.

God, Diane, don't start with the 'I-told-you-so about Nam,' please don't—

Keep those glasses on, then, Matt. No gross jokes, 'kay?

Too bad about those assholes down the street . . .at least you're safe, kid.

The door slides open; it's the associate professor, the psychic dilettante. "I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"No," Diane murmurs.

As a matter of fact, *bitch—*

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Just butt out, Matt! Then, to the associate professor: "Want a beer?"

"You read my mind. Oh, I forgot your name."

"Diane—"

The associate professor smiles. "— As in Moon Goddess."

This one is hot for your bod', sis . . .

And so were you—

—Still am, still am—

I'll fix your ass. Diane turns to the associate dilettante, the psychic professor. "And your name?"

"Call me Frannie."

Call me Ishmael.

That does it — "Please, Fran, sit down"—Frannie sits on the folding chair and Matt sinks, going down through the fabric, down through the concrete, to a branch below the balcony.

"The party was getting to be too much for you, too?

Diane laughs, and strangles it abruptly. "A bit too much of too little."

"I'm sorry—" Frannie sits forward. "Was there a joke there?"

"The joke was on me." Diane shrugs, pauses, and decides to continue. "This teaching assistant, the one who brought his Mac, was swapping disks, and one of them had a game called Othello—he told me it was the *revised* version, and I asked him if it was the version where Iago gets the promotion—"

Frannie laughs, spilling beer on her blouse—"I just bought this—"

"Sorry. But, see, you *got* it—not these two kids, one with a B.A. in English from Stanford, and the other with a Theatre fucking Arts degree, neither understood, *they did not get it*—even after I explained it'd be like King Lear's children all accepting the terms of his will, or Hamlet's mom never remarrying, and they still just stared at me with idiot blank faces."

"So? So they didn't get a good—if recondite—joke, 's their loss. I can remember how my mom'd always kvetch about Standards Falling Down All Over Our Heads—And usually what was really bugging her was the rent, or grocery bills, or something else."

"Well, Frannie, that's interesting, but I'm not late with the rent, my credit card's paid up, and my savings account is just fine—"

"Look, Greg told me . . . "

"Told you what?" Diane is tearing the label off the beer, stuffing it into the bottle, to toss into the ocean, along with the day's junk mail. "Told you about my roommate's puppy I ran over when I backed the car out of the driveway?" A Greenpeace appeal goes into an emptied bottle of San Miguel.

"He told us—*me!*—told me about how your brother died in Viet Nam, that this is the seventeenth anniversary of his death."

"Yes. Our host would." Diane opens the cooler and gets herself another

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Carta Blanca and a Tooth for Frannie. "My brother was killed by his own men."

"That's what Greg said. . . ."

Diane is getting pissed, pissed off: "And what else did Greg say?"

Frannie opens her can. "That you *knew*." Takes a sip. "That you knew well before he went to 'Nam, that you told him not to go, to go to Canada instead, like Greg wound up doing, or go to Denmark, catch a hydrofoil to Sweden—like Julia's brother."

Diane shudders, as much from the cool breeze as from her fury.

Why'd he drag Julia into it? Diane can just imagine the presumptuous smirks. Or were they scoring a moral point . . . . after all, Julia's brother had come out of The War with a red badge of sanctimony. And Diane's brother just got fragged.

"They were telling ghost stories, in there—"

"I could hear—" Diane runs a hand through her hair. Time to dye it. Red or green?

"Apparently, this place is haunted. A ghost is always opening drawers and bending spoons, turning the shower on in the middle of the night."

"I know." Matt had told her, before Greg and Lucy had.

". . . I can see," Frannie finally offers, "That you don't approve of talking about it—"

"Not for a bunch of fucked-up yuppies, dinks, and technonerds, not for an evening's frisson. Let's talk about the ghosts on Wall Street or the ghosts in the Pentagon—" Diane breaks off. Laughs softly. A craven laugh. "I sound like a self-righteous asshole." She turns, looks at Frannie. And sees her. Without Matt's assistance. *Sees* her. Maybe five, six years older. Crow's feet. In the shower. Head split open. Her shampoo and blood going down the drain.

"Are you all right?"

Diane feels Frannie's hand on her shoulder. "You look," Frannie says, "like you've seen a—"

"Don't tell me what I've seen."

Matt, sitting on a branch below them, begins to laugh, to cackle, to giggle, to chortle, to howl, to yowl, to growl, to purr, to hiss.

Go.

Away.

"Would you," Frannie suggests, "like to go somewhere for coffee?"

Diane likes that idea.

She can get away. For a while. From The Ghosts.

From Lucy. Who will crash into an island divider on a San Francisco freeway when her brakes shit out on her.

From Greg, who in his fifties will be crushed to death—though by what, Diane could not tell.

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From Babystar, who will die a crib death, shortly after he starts walking.

Yes, she will. Even if she has to leave with another ghost.

Will she sleep with Frannie, the way she slept with Greg, the way she slept with Lucy, the way she slept with *Matt*? Please . . . Dear God or Goddess, White Noise or Black Hole, Malign Thug or Good Shepherd. Not another Mercy Fuck. Not tonight.

Diane leaves these people.

Frannie offers to drive. "No way." Diane drives. She *always* drives. Ever since Julia woke her up one night in the dorm at Reed College, with a dream about her dying as a passenger in a car crash.

God, how Diane wishes Julia would hurry back from L.A.—she never has to go through these tired games with Julia. How Diane wishes she hadn't killed the puppy dog given Julia by her sanctimonious brother. And God, how she hopes Julia totally blew that interview, didn't get that job.

Diane leaves these people.

These ghosts. To their party. To their games.

And ghost stories. ●

For Teri Hodel

MICROWAVE TRANSMIGRATION

When all the chips in the grid hum
with self-aware oscillations and
the station's panels become a skin
locked open into a sensorium
sensitive like rods and cones
the station moves on its own vector
dips as might a condor and preys
upon the sun for a powerfilled wind
ahead the visible light unfolds
a new universe for the unblind

—Robert Frazier

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AT RISK

by Michael Cassutt

Since Michael Cassutt's appearance in "Astra (with "A Star is Born" in our July 1984 issue), he has written scripts for a number of television series. His credits include "The Twilight Zone," "Max Headroom," "V," and an unproduced script for "Asimov's Probe." His latest novel, *Dragon Season*, and *Sacred Visions*, an anthology of Catholic science fiction and fantasy co-edited with Father Andrew Greeley and Martin Harry Greenberg, are both forthcoming from Tor Books.

art: Laura Lakey

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Within minutes the news was all over the office. David, the administrative assistant, got the call from the lab in Canoga Park. David understandably took each such message as a personal affront. The look on his face cued Ellen, the day nurse, who told Marie, the afternoon nurse, as they passed Alex's office, "Another positive." Their voices carried clearly through the cheap fiberboard door.

Alex glanced at the two men in her office. "I'm sorry," she said. "We're generally more sensitive than that."

"That's okay," the patient said, though it was clear that he had just realized that three days from now the next "positive" could be him.

He was a young man named Tony who worked, the file said, at a personnel agency in Long Beach. He had come to the clinic with his friend, Gene, and now they sat holding hands, the two of them in their Levis 501s, their LaCoste shirts, with their identically clipped mustaches, looking, Alex thought, more like two British officers from *The Jewel in the Crown* than two lovers taking tests for the human immunodeficiency virus.

"How much do you know about AIDS?" she asked him.

"Everything," Tony said. Gene added, "We've been through this six times already. With friends."

"Well, then," Alex said, "you know you're going to be tested for the presence of AIDS antibodies in your blood, not for the virus itself. And that exposure to the AIDS virus doesn't necessarily mean you will contract the disease—"

"—Though one out of every three do," Tony finished for her.

Alex stood up and opened the door. "Why don't I just turn you over to Dr. Kelsey, who will administer the tests. Carl?" she called. Tony and Gene left. Before Alex could close her door David buzzed from reception. "Are you expecting a Robin Hamilton?"

"No."

David's voice changed, growing more conspiratorial. "I think he just wants to talk to someone, Alex. He's not one of the *usual,* if you know what I mean."

She didn't know what he meant. "What the hell, my last patient ran short. Send him in."

The clinic was located in West Hollywood, "Boys' Town," L.A.'s gay district, and its clientele was almost exclusively gay men. Naturally there were women in the area, as well as thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe, but if those people were requiring treatment for AIDS (and statistics suggested some of them had to be affected), they got it somewhere else.

Robin Hamilton was straight. Alex knew the moment he walked into

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the office. It wasn't just the clothes (though he did not wear the "uniform") or the haircut, or the walk, since none of those were infallible cues. It was the way his right eyebrow rose when Alex opened the door. "Miss Segal?" he said.

"Yes, come in." She showed him a chair and took her seat. "You looked surprised."

He smiled, briefly. "I guess I didn't know what to expect. I've never been in a place like this before."

"A clinic?" She was being coy.

"I mean, in an AIDS clinic."

"Well, why are you here now?"

"Because I've been waking up at night in a cold sweat and have this swelling in my neck and a fever, and I've lost weight for no reason, and because I've seen three doctors already who've given me three different diagnoses. . . . Should I go on?"

She stared at him. He was better-looking than the average, shorter than the average, and seemed to be in perfect health. "Maybe you'd better let me. Have you had a high-risk sexual encounter?"

"You mean with another man?"

"Or with a female prostitute. Or with an IV drug user. With *anyone*—without using some sort of protection."

"Well . . . " He actually blushed. "No men, no prostitutes, no junkies. Only one contact in the past year. Ah, other than that one I was fairly good about . . . protection."

Men usually thought that *thinking* about using a condom qualified them as responsible. "You're not married or involved."

"No."

"Ever had a blood transfusion? Ever injected drugs?" She pushed a form toward him. "Does anything on this list strike you as familiar?"

He read it carefully, then glanced up. "Sorry, no."

"Well, then, Mr. Hamilton," Alex said, "I don't know what to tell you, what advice I can give. These tests are a serious matter. We've refined them to the point where the waiting period is just days and not weeks . . . but they're not infallible. They put people under tremendous stress. On paper you are not at risk. Do you really need this?"

He cleared his throat. "I understand all that. Maybe I'm not used to being sick. But I've described my symptoms. What else should I do?"

What else should *she* do? "Take the test."

Across the street from the clinic was Clancy's, a singles bar, or what passed for one these days, catering to the medical staff at Cedars Sinai hospital, which was just a block away. An island of cautious heterosexuality.

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"If Robin Hamilton has AIDS," Carl Kelsey announced as his vodka tonic arrived, "we are *all* dead."

"Why?" Ellen asked.

"The man is straighter than the shortest distance between two points! Unless he's the world's greatest liar, his sexual history is something my own mother would approve of."

"Then he must be a priest," Alex said.

"He's a pilot," Kelsey said. "An Air Force jock stationed out at March. He came all the way down here because you don't go to a flight surgeon with a problem like this, not if you want to keep flying."

Ellen giggled. "So he's weird for airplanes or something?"

Kelsey peered over his glasses at her. "No. He just doesn't sleep around. He's twenty-nine years old, good-looking, presentable—I mean, you both saw him—and, in the last eight years he has slept with exactly three different women. All of them were long-term relationships. Can you believe that? He only sleeps with women he loves!"

"Some people go for years sleeping with one person, Carl," Alex snapped.

"Married people."

"Oh?" Alex smiled sweetly. "Like you?"

Kelsey smiled back. "I acknowledge marital fidelity as an ideal which, alas, I occasionally fail to attain."

A man appeared behind Kelsey. "This guy bothering you two lovely ladies?"

"Yes," Alex said. "Have him thrown out."

Instead the visitor slapped Kelsey on the shoulder. "Maybe I'll just buy the feisty one a drink instead." He took a look at Alex's face. "Or not." He spread his hands. "Maybe later."

"Friend of yours?" Ellen asked Kelsey when the man was gone.

Carl shrugged. "I've seen him around Cedars. Works in OB."

"Christ," Alex said.

"Lighten up, Alex," Kelsey said. "He just offered to buy you a drink, not stitch up your episiotomy."

"Carl—" Ellen started to say, but Alex interrupted her. "Never mind. Carl has a point—a crude one, but a good one. I have gotten a little icy, isn't that right, Carl?"

"There's a *Titanic* joke in here somewhere, but I'm not going to make it. Yeah. Your celibacy is showing."

"Well, how would you like to have been put on the shelf just three years past your sexual peak, which was probably when you were fifteen? I'm scared, Carl. So is Ellen. So is everybody we know—even you, though you're too chickenshit to admit it. I mean, doesn't it drive you insane with worry to know that some floozie you boinked on your lunch hour

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could have made it with a guy who swings both ways, or who buys it on Sunset Boulevard? That a few moments of sweaty passion means sexually transmitted death?"

She shut up. She was shaking, having frightened herself all over again. Carl was right—her celibacy *was* showing. She had broken up with Mark three years ago and, except for a few dates in those first six months, had slept with no one since. She wouldn't have thought it possible—her sexual problems with Mark had less to do with what went on in their bedroom than what Mark did in the bedrooms of others—and it damned near drove her crazy. But eventually it got easier . . . especially with the daily reminder of what the horrible price could be.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow." She paid for her drink and left, heading home to her cat and her VCR.

Yesterday's eleven A.M. positive test result became Alex's ten A.M. you-have-the-virus appointment. The patient took the news surprisingly well . . . not even a comment. Of course, the fact that the patient was a four-year-old boy contributed. Alex doubted that he even understood why he was sick. The boy's father, on the other hand, who knew that the child had contracted AIDS from a tainted blood transfusion during his first week of life, had not taken the news well at all.

After that one Alex wanted nothing more than to hide in her office for the rest of the day. She almost had to force herself to go out to the hall for a drink of water. On the way back from the cooler she passed one of Kelsey's examination rooms. The door was open and she couldn't help glancing inside, where she saw a tanned and well-muscled male back. Unexpectedly, she lingered just long enough to cross the line between impersonal medical detachment and curiousity. Another fag, she thought with surprising anger.

Then the fag turned suddenly, and it was Rob Hamilton grinning at her. "What do you think this is, Miss Segal, a peep show?"

She blushed. "I guess I owe you a tip."

"Buy me a drink instead."

That was quick. "I think you're busy at the moment."

"And not in a great mood, considering the circumstances. But two days from now, when the results of the test are in, I'm going to need that drink." He looked very serious. "No matter which way it goes. Deal?"

She couldn't believe she was having this conversation. She had no intentions of getting involved with anybody, especially a potential patient. "Let's talk Thursday."

On Thursday Alex went into the office early and had David call the lab in Canoga Park for the report on Rob Hamilton. The lab wasn't ready

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yet, so while waiting for the call back she caught up on her paperwork. It was a way of not thinking about this sudden swell of interest in a completely unsuitable man.

Kelsey knocked on her door and came in. She was grateful for the interruption. "No word on Hamilton yet?"

"Any moment," she said.

"You're always hoping for a negative on these goddamn things, but this time—I don't know, it's like it's my own report. Hamilton could be *me*."

Alex smiled. "I'm sorry, Carl, Hamilton is *better* than you."

It was one of those rare times that Kelsey had no ready reply. He laughed to himself as he got up. "I think the ice is melting, Segal. Watch yourself." He paused at the door. "You know, even if he is negative on antibodies, there's something weird going on with that guy. It's as if he's got a set of symptoms just looking for a name. I just don't know what it is yet." He went out.

She was prepared to spend the next fifteen minutes thinking about what a jerk Carl Kelsey was, but the lab in Canoga Park called and the news went all over the office in a moment. Rob Hamilton had tested negative. Clean.

Alex noticed that her hands were shaking.

"The weird thing about this whole business," Rob said, "was that I kept worrying about my job." They were in a booth in Clancy's. After getting the good news Rob had insisted on letting Alex buy him a drink. Then he bought her a drink. She countered with sandwiches, he popped for dessert and another round, after which, by unspoken mutual consent, they agreed to lose track. "Just the *suspicion* of—" He hesitated. "—I guess I can say it, of AIDS, can ruin you in the Air Force."

" 'Be all that you can be'—except don't be at risk?"

"Yeah. I mean, even if you ultimately cleared, suddenly you find yourself off flight status and looking at a transfer to someplace like East Jesus, Montana, with no chance of ever running a squadron. Which wouldn't have bothered me, a couple of months ago." He shook his head. "I really had no idea that my job was that important to me."

"More important than your life?"

"Hey, I cheat death three times a week. Piece of cake." His tone, however, was ironic.

"You must have been one of those little boys who fell in love with airplanes."

"The old sitting-on-the-fence-at-the-airfield number? No. I needed money to get through Wisconsin State University at River Falls, so I signed up for ROTC. Flight school beat being a mechanic, and paid better.

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I mean, I like flying, but I'm very conservative about it, too. None of this buzzing the tower shit. No silk scarf for this kid."

"Come on, I thought all you guys with the right stuff wanted to be top guns."

He shrugged. "As I said, I really didn't think about it much until now. I figured I would put in my time, then go off and work in engineering —maybe even teach." He stopped talking and looked at her. "I think this is the point where I say, 'But enough about me.' "

"Oh, no, it's fascinating—"

"Sure. But my whole seduction technique is based on *listening,* not talking." He kissed her, and she was surprised that it not only didn't surprise her, but that she wanted him to. "So . . . talk."

What could you possibly want to know? I'm five-feet-four and weigh a hundred-and-ten pounds which I'm always trying to reduce to a brief argument over whose car to take. He wins because his old Cougar has a front seat which allows them to discover *I'm thirty-seven years old—you were in first grade when I was in junior high, for God's sake! I was married for seven years and we kept postponing children and then broke up. No further details are available; we aren't going to know each other well enough* so that she does not fumble the key when she opens the door to her condo, and then before she can turn on the lights *Every night until I was eleven. And everyone called me "Sandy," which I hated, so I renamed myself "Zan," which lasted until I was in grad school, when Mark started calling me "Alex"* is pleased to discover that he's not a silent fuck; he whispers as they undress and *I went to Claremont and got a master's in psych because I couldn't think of anything better to do* it after so long is painful in a way that could make her enjoy the pain. She never wants him to *Stop. You were going to tell me you love me and you can't* hear the voices from the street below. It's late. Sleep now.

He even phoned the next day, Friday, which surprised Alex. Not that he called; she was surprised because her number was unlisted and she hadn't given it to him.

He said he was off to ferry an F-117A to Nellis, whatever that meant, and wouldn't be back in the area until next Wednesday. It was one of those conversations punctuated by silences: Alex certainly wasn't going to ask when she might see him again, though the comment about Nellis and Wednesday was an obvious cue. Then he thanked her for a lovely evening. "I didn't want to be alone."

"I didn't want you to be alone."

Then he said, "I'm going to call you on Wednesday."

She told him that would be nice and hung up, not knowing if it would be nice or not.

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* * *

"I think Hamilton is some kind of mutant," Kelsey told her that afternoon.

"Because he managed to get me out for a drink?"

"I'm serious. The more I look at his symptoms and tests, the stranger they get." He blinked. "I didn't know he got you out for a drink . . . "

But Alex was already beating herself up for going to bed with Rob —completely unprotected! "What do you mean, Carl?"

"He isn't really *sick*. Yes, he had some of the superficial symptoms of AIDS-related complex, but fever and nightsweats could also be indications of about forty other problems. His lungs are clear, his cardiovascular system's in great shape—his body fat is just right. He's lean and mean. And look at this."

He handed her one of the forms every patient at the clinic had to complete, a detailed health history. If not for the presence of a name and some vital statistics at the top of the form, Alex would have thought it unused. "No illnesses *ever?*" She handed it back to Kelsey.

"How about that? This guy has never had measles, mumps, chicken pox, pneumonia, allergies, herpes, nothing. He couldn't *remember* ever having a cold." Kelsey laughed. "He admitted that he'd broken his wrist when he was a kid. But either he's a statistical fluke, that one in four billion thing, in which case I'm gonna try to avoid the falling meteorites on my way home tonight, or he's got something . . . beneficial."

David called Alex then to tell her that a patient was waiting. "I'll be right there," she said. She turned to Kelsey. "What are you going to do?"

He slapped Rob's folder. "Play medical detective for a while. If I have time, I might even start to work on my speech accepting the Nobel prize."

Later that Monday the report from the lab in Canoga Park on Tony from Long Beach came in—positive. Alex had him come in with Gene so he could get the news and so Alex could tell him that a single positive could be wrong. That night he tried to kill himself, but Gene stopped him. Alex heard about it Tuesday morning, right about the time Rob called.

"This isn't Wednesday," she said, grateful for the distraction, if nothing else.

"Worse yet, I'm still at Nellis."

"Long distance. I'm flattered."

"I was thinking about you and me—" He paused, giving Alex more than enough time to formulate her replies. *It won't work, I don't need the pain at this stage of my life, I'm out of this game for good, did I say it won't work? But thank you.* "—And it's not a very good idea. So I'm

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calling to say I'm sorry if I made you . . . uncomfortable. And I *won't* be calling you tomorrow."

"Okay." She sighed, relieved.

"Take care."

But if she was so relieved, why was she feeling so sad all of a sudden?

Wednesday night she woke up in a cold sweat. Thursday morning she found she was running a slight fever. There was a swelling in her underarms. She was too frightened to do anything about it. She just wanted Kelsey to be right about Rob.

She was in the shower Friday morning when Kelsey called. "Can you meet me at Cedars this morning?"

"I have patients starting at ten," she said, dripping onto the hardwood floor.

"Come here at nine-thirty, then. It's important."

"No makeup this morning." Those were the first words of Kelsey's important message.

"I'm transitioning to a new self-image," she snapped.

"Sorry. I thought you'd want to see this." He sat her down in front of his IBM. "I built this little contact tree with the database here, and a few interesting examinations. This is Rob Hamilton's past."

"I thought he had something like three contacts in a decade."

"Yeah, but what contacts did his contacts have? This is his most recent, the only really relevant one. Call her Sheila B." Thirty or so names scrolled onto the screen. "It just so happens that Sheila went to see her doctor a couple of months ago and provided a list of *her* contacts. As you can see, this woman is no nun."

Alex began to feel a chill. Suppose Rob had something new—and deadly?

"Sheila admits that she belonged to a swing club—bisexual—for a while, which may account for the, uh, volume. It probably accounts for the fact that no less than four of her thirty-odd contacts have tested positive for exposure to AIDS. At least one of those men has since showed up as an AIDS victim on lists at the Centers for Disease Control."

"Carl, what the hell are you trying to tell me?"

He shut off the computer. "Sheila B *should* have shown up as AIDS-exposed by now at the very least. Hamilton had a better-than-normal shot at exposure, too. But something weird has happened. I saw Sheila out in Riverside a couple of days ago and ran my tests on her.

"She shows *no signs at all* of the antibodies. And get this: she told me she's gone back and slept with that former lover of hers who's on the list!"

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"For God's sake, why?"

"To cure him, she says. And you know what? She may be right. I think it's to pass on the 'cure' she caught from our friend Hamilton."

"You don't have proof, Carl. This is all circumstantial."

"That just came in." He slid a Canoga Park lab report across the desk to her. The patient was Sheila B's AIDS-stricken lover. The result, however, was negative.

"I don't understand this."

"Look, suppose Hamilton is carrying some sort of broad spectrum immunity to disease, something which can be passed on through sex."

"Sexually transmitted defense?"

"Yeah. Shit, that's probably what keeps these things from wiping out the population completely." Kelsey rubbed his hands together. He reminded Alex of a nine-year-old with a new toy. "All I've got to do now is get this stuff to the CDC for their stamp of approval. That should only take a year or two, ten thousand deaths in the meantime, but that's big medicine.

"Then I'm going to give Robin Hamilton the names and numbers of every promiscuous woman I know, and we are well into the double digits here—"

"Why?"

"Alex, this man's got to start sleeping around. It's his *duty* to infect everyone with what he's got."

Feeling happy for the first time in years, Alex hurried toward the clinic. When she walked in she knew from David's face that something awful had happened. "It's not Tony," she said.

"No, not Tony." He handed her the L.A. *Times* which was folded open to the Metro section. On the lower right was a headline, "Auto Accident Kills Two." San Bernardino? She read just far enough to see that one of the victims was a Riverside resident named Sheila Barnes.

The other was an Air Force captain from nearby March Air Force Base, a Robin Hamilton. "Wasn't he a patient here?"

At this time on Fridays, with the four o'clock shift change at Cedars and most businesses in the area letting off at five, Clancy's was packed. Alex sat at the bar nursing her second white wine.

She had been coming to Clancy's more and more lately, but never without thinking about Robin Hamilton. Would she have fallen in love with him? Or he with her? It would have been tough on both of them. Kelsey and those like him would have literally bled him white, the way they had Sheila B's poor bisexual lover. A little arithmetic could have

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shown them that one man doesn't produce enough blood to save the world . . .

She had her coat thrown over the stool next to her. The moment she picked it up, she heard, "Pardon me, honey, is anyone sitting here?"

It was a man in his early thirties whose tan, jacket, Rolex and smile classed him as a fuck-'em-and-forget-'em just as surely as the LaCoste shirts and 501s defined the sad men of Boys' Town.

"Why no," she said, forcing a smile. "Make yourself at home." ●

The Star (from and for Arthur C. Clarke)

That star flared up the week my mother died:
Nova Scorpius, low in the southeast—
the brightest in nine hundred years, so bright
you could see it with the sun up. "Star of Peace,"
they called it, the propagandists on both sides,
because they signed their treaty then. At least
neither one took credit for the light.
That was God's doing . . . God the Beast
of Sacrifice: seven planets spun
around that star. Could any one of them
have habored life? The scientists say not.
A hot blue star like that is just too young.
There were no scientists at Bethlehem
when in the east a star flared up so hot
and bright and blue and young. That week the Earth
was bathed in radiance. They say wise men came forth.
Did planets burn to cinders in the light?
And mothers die, to celebrate the birth?

—Joe Haldeman

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LIESERL

by Karen Joy Fowler

Though Scientific truths seem sometimes
to be writ in stone, those of the
heart may be a bit more ephemeral . . .

art: Janet Aulisio

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Einstein received the first letter in the afternoon post. It had traveled in bags and boxes all the way from Hungary, sailing finally through the brass slit in Einstein's door. *Dear Albert,* it said. *Little Lieserl is here. Mileva says to tell you that your new daughter has tiny fingers and a head as bald as an egg. Mileva says to say that she loves you and will write you herself when she feels better.* The signature was Mileva's father's. The letter was sent at the end of January, but arrived at the beginning of February, so even if everything in it was true when written, it was entirely possible that none of it was true now. Einstein read the letter several times. He was frightened. Why could Mileva not write him herself? The birth must have been a very difficult one. Was the baby really as bald as all that? He wished for a picture. What kind of little eyes did she have? Did she look like Mileva? Mileva had an aura of thick, dark hair. Einstein was living in Bern, Switzerland, and Mileva had returned to her parents' home in Titel, Hungary for the birth. Mileva was hurt because Einstein sent her to Hungary alone, although she had not said so. The year was 1902. Einstein was twenty-two years old. None of this is as simple as it sounds, but one must start somewhere even though such placement inevitably entails the telling of a lie.

Outside Einstein's window, large star-shaped flakes of snow swirled silently in the air like the pretend snow in a glass globe. The sky darkened into evening as Einstein sat on his bed with his papers. The globe had been shaken and Einstein was the still, ceramic figure at its swirling heart, the painted Father Christmas. Lieserl. How I love her already, Einstein thought, dangerously. Before I even know her, how I love her.

The second letter arrived the next morning. *Liebes Schatzerl,* Mileva wrote. *Your daughter is so beautiful. But the world does not suit her at all. With such fury she cries! Papa is coming soon, I tell her. Papa will change everything for you, everything you don't like, the whole world if this is what you want. Papa loves Lieserl. I am very tired still. You must hurry to us. Lieserl's hair has come in dark and I think she is getting a tooth.* Einstein stared at the letter.

A friend of Einstein's will tell Einstein one day that he, himself, would never have the courage to marry a woman who was not absolutely sound. He will say this soon after meeting Mileva. Mileva walked with a limp although it is unlikely that a limp is all this friend meant. Einstein will respond that Mileva had a lovely voice.

Einstein had not married Mileva yet when he received this letter, although he wanted to very badly. She was his Liebes Dockerl, his little doll. He had not found a way to support her. He had just run an advertisement offering his services as a tutor. He wrote Mileva back. *Now you can make observations,* he said. *I would like once to produce a Lieserl*

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myself, it must be so interesting. She certainly can cry already, but to laugh she'll learn later. Therein lies a profound truth. On the bottom of the letter he sketched his tiny room in Bern. It resembled the drawings he will do later to accompany his Gedanken, or thought experiments, how he would visualize physics in various situations. In this sketch, he labeled the features of his room with letters. Big B for the bed. Little b for a picture. He was trying to figure a way to fit Mileva and Lieserl into his room. He was inviting Mileva to help.

In June he will get a job with the Swiss Civil Service. A year after Lieserl's birth, the following January, he will marry Mileva. Years later when friends ask him why he married her, his answer will vary. Duty, he will say sometimes. Sometimes he will say that he has never been able to remember why.

A third letter arrived the next day. *Mein liebes, boses Schatzerl!* it said. *Lieserl misses her Papa. She is so clever, Albert. You will never believe it. Today she pulled a book from the shelf. She opened it, sucking hard on her fingers. Can Lieserl read? I asked her, joking. But she pointed to the letter E, making such a sweet, sticky fingerprint beside it on the page. E, she said. You will be so proud of her. Already she runs and laughs. I had not realized how quickly they grow up. When are you coming to us? Mileva.*

His room was too small. The dust collected over his books and danced in the light with Brownian-like movements. Einstein went out for a walk. The sun shone, both from above him and also as reflected off the new snowbanks in blinding white sheets. Icicles shrank visibly at the roots until they cracked, falling from the eaves like knives into the soft snow beneath them. Mileva is a book, like you, his mother had told him. What you need is a housekeeper. What you need is a wife.

Einstein met Mileva in Zurich at the Swiss Federal Polytechnical School. Entrance to the school required the passage of a stiff examination. Einstein himself failed the General Knowledge section on his first try. She will ruin your life, Einstein's mother said. No decent family will have her. Don't sleep with her. If she gets a child, you'll be in a pretty mess. It is not clear what Einstein's mother's objection to Mileva was. She was unhappy that Mileva had scholastic ambitions and then more unhappy when Mileva failed her examinations twice and could not get her diploma.

Five days passed before Einstein heard from Mileva again. *Mein liebstes Schatzerl. If she has not climbed onto the kitchen table, then she is sliding down the banisters,* Mileva complained. *I must watch her every minute. I have tried to take her picture for you as you asked, but she will*

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never hold still long enough. Until you come to her, you must be content with my descriptions. Her hair is dark and thick and curly. She has the eyes of a doe. Already she has outgrown all the clothes I had for her and is in proper dresses with aprons. Papa, papa, papa, she says. It is her favorite word. Yes, I tell her. Papa is coming. I teach her to throw kisses. I teach her to clap her hands. Papa is coming, she says, kissing and clapping. Papa loves his Lieserl.

Einstein loved his Lieserl whom he had not met. He loved Mileva. He loved science. He loved music. He solved scientific puzzles while playing the violin. He thought of Lieserl while solving scientific puzzles. Love is faith. Science is faith. Einstein could see that his faith was being tested. Science feels like art, Einstein will say later, but it is not. Art involves inspiration and experience, but experience is a hindrance to the scientist. He has only a few years in which to invent, with his innocence, a whole new world that he must live in for the rest of his life. Einstein would not always be such a young man. Einstein did not have all the time in the world.

Einstein waited for the next letter in the tiny cell of his room. The letters were making him unhappy. He did not want to receive another so he would not leave, even for an instant, and risk delaying it. He had not responded to Mileva's last letters. He did not know how. He made himself a cup of tea and stirred it, noticing that the tea leaves gathered in the center of the cup bottom, but not about the circumference. He reached for a fresh piece of paper and filled it with drawings of rivers, not the rivers of a landscape, but the narrow, twisting rivers of a map.

The letter came only a few hours later in the afternoon post, sliding like a tongue through the slit in the door. Einstein caught it as it fell. *Was treibst Du Schatzerl?* it began. *Your little Lieserl has been asked to a party and looks like a princess tonight. Her dress is long and white like a bride's. I have made her hair curl by wrapping it over my fingers. She wears a violet sash and violet ribbons. She is dancing with my father in the hallway, her feet on my father's feet, her head only slightly higher than his waist. They are waltzing. All the boys will want to dance with you, my father said to her, but she frowned. I am not interested in boys, she answered. Nowhere is there a boy I could love like I love my papa.*

In 1899 Einstein began writing to Mileva about the electrodynamics of moving bodies, which became the title of his 1905 paper on relativity. In 1902 Einstein loved Mileva, but in 1916 in a letter to his friend Besso, Einstein will write that he would have become mentally and physically exhausted if he had not been able to keep his wife at a distance, out of sight and out of hearing. You cannot know, he will tell his friends, the tricks a woman such as my wife will play.

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Mileva, trained as a physicist herself, though without a diploma, will complain that she never understood the special theory of relativity. She will blame Einstein who, she will say, has never taken the time to explain it properly to her.

Einstein wrote a question along the twisting line of one river. Where are you? He chose another river for a second question. How are you moving? He extended the end of the second river around many curves until it finally merged with the first.

Liebes Schatzerl! the next letter said. It came four posts later. *She is a lovely young lady. If you could only see her, your breath would catch in your throat. Hair like silk. Eyes like stars. She sends her love. Tell my darling Papa, she says, that I will always be his little Lieserl, always running out into the snowy garden, caped in red, to draw angels. Suddenly I am frightened for her, Albert. She is as fragile as a snowflake. Have I kept her too sheltered? What does she know of men? If only you had been here to advise me.* Even after its long journey, the letter smelled of roses.

Two friends came for dinner that night to Einstein's little apartment. One was a philosophy student named Solovine. One was a mathematician named Habicht. The three together called themselves the Olympia Academy, making fun of the serious bent of their minds.

Einstein made a simple dinner of fried fish and bought wine. They sat about the table, drinking and picking the last pieces of fish out with their fingers until nothing remained on their plates but the spines with the smaller bones attached like the naked branches of winter trees. The friends argued loudly about music. Solovine's favorite composer was Beethoven, whose music, Einstein suddenly began to shout, was emotionally over-charged, especially in C minor. Einstein's favorite composer was Mozart. Beethoven created his beautiful music, but Mozart discovered it, Einstein said. Beethoven wrote the music of the human heart, but Mozart transcribed the music of God. There is a perfection in the humanless world which will draw Einstein all his life. It is an irony that his greatest achievement will be to add the relativity of men to the objective Newtonian science of angels.

He did not tell his friends about his daughter. The wind outside was a choir without a voice. All his life, Einstein will say later, all his life, he tried to free himself from the chains of the *merely personal*. Einstein rarely spoke of his personal life. Such absolute silence suggests that he escaped from it easily or, alternatively, that its hold was so powerful he was afraid to ever say it aloud. One or both or neither of these things must be true.

Let us talk about the merely personal. The information received

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through the five senses is appallingly approximate. Take sight, the sense on which humans depend most. Man sees only a few of all the colors in the world. It is as if a curtain has been drawn over a large window, but not drawn so that it fully meets in the middle. The small gap at the center represents the visual abilities of man.

A cat hears sounds that men must only imagine. It has an upper range of 100,000 cycles per second as opposed to the 35,000 to 45,000 a dog can hear or the 20,000 which marks the upper range for men. A cat can distinguish between two sounds made only 18 inches apart when the cat, itself, is at a distance of 60 feet.

Some insects can identify members of their own species by smell at distances nearing a mile.

A blindfolded man holding his nose cannot distinguish the taste of an apple from an onion.

Of course, man fumbles about the world, perceiving nothing, understanding nothing. In a whole universe, man has been shut into one small room. Of course, Einstein could not begin to know what was happening to his daughter or to Mileva, deprived even of these blundering senses. The postman was careless with Mileva's next letter. He failed to push it properly through the door slit so that it fell back into the snow where it lay all night and was ice the next morning. Einstein picked the envelope up on his front step. It was so cold it burnt his fingers. He breathed on it until he could open it.

Another quiet evening with your Lieserl. We read until late and then sat together, talking. She asked me many questions tonight about you, hoping, I think, to hear something, anything I had not yet told her. But she settled, sweetly, for the old stories all over again. She got out the little drawing you sent her just after her birth; have I told you how she treasures it? When she was a child she used to point to it. Papa sits here, she would say, pointing. Papa sleeps here. I wished that I could gather her into my lap again. It would have been so silly, Albert. You must picture her with her legs longer than mine and new gray in the black of her hair. Was I silly to want it, Schatzerl? Shouldn't someone have warned me that I wouldn't be able to hold her forever?

Einstein set the letter back down into the snow. He had not yet found it. He had never had such a beautiful daughter. Perhaps he had not even met Mileva yet, Mileva whom he still loved, but who was not sound and who liked to play tricks.

Perhaps, he thought, he will find the letter in the spring when the snow melts. If the ink has not run, if he can still read it, then he will decide what to do. Then he will have to decide. It began to snow again. Einstein went back into his room for his umbrella. The snow covered the letter. He could not even see the letter under the snow when he stepped

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over it on his way to the bakery. He did not want to go home where no letter was hidden by the door. He was twenty-two years old and he stood outside the bakery, eating his bread, reading a book in the tiny world he had made under his umbrella in the snow.

Several years later, after Einstein has married Mileva and neither ever, ever mentions Lieserl, after they have had two sons, a colleague will describe a visit to Einstein's apartment. The door will be open so that the newly washed floor can dry. Mileva will be hanging dripping laundry in the hall. Einstein will rock a baby's bassinet with one hand and hold a book open with the other. The stove will smoke. How does he bear it? the colleague will ask in a letter which still survives, a letter anyone can read. That genius. How can he bear it?

The answer is that he could not. He will try for many years and then Einstein will leave Mileva and his sons, sending back to them the money he wins along with the Nobel Prize. When the afternoon post came, the postman had found the letter again and included it with the new mail. So there were two letters, only one had been already opened.

Einstein put the new letter aside. He put it under his papers. He hid it in his bookcase. He retrieved it and opened it clumsily because his hands were shaking. He had known this letter was coming, known it perhaps with Lieserl's first tooth, certainly with her first dance. It was exactly what he had expected, worse than he could have imagined. *She is as bald as ice and as mad as a goddess, my Albert,* Mileva wrote. *But she is still my Liebes Dockerl, my little doll. She clings to me, crying if I must leave her for a minute. Mama, Mama! Such madness in her eyes and her mouth. She is toothless and soils herself. She is my baby. And yours, Schatzerl. Nowhere is there a boy I could love like my Papa, she says, lisping again just the way she did when she was little. She has left a message for you. It is a message from the dead. You will get what you really want, Papa, she said. I have gone to get it for you. Remember that it comes from me. She was weeping and biting her nails until they bled. Her eyes were white with madness. She said something else. The brighter the light, the more shadows, my papa, she said. My darling Papa. My poor Papa. You will see.*

The room was too small. Einstein went outside where his breath came in a cloud from his mouth, tangible, as if he were breathing on glass. He imagined writing on the surface of a mirror, drawing one of his Gedanken with his finger into his own breath. He imagined a valentine. Lieserl, he wrote across it. He loved Lieserl. He cut the word in half, down the *s* with the stroke of his nail. The two halves of the heart opened and closed, beating against each other, faster and faster, like wings, until they split apart and vanished from his mind. ●

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THE EINSTEIN WE NEVER KNEW

She barefoot, smiling, laughing,
playing hide and seek in spring Alpine snow;
He young and slender, crazy in love
laughing and chasing
he catches her and
they fall, make awkward tender love,
crushing flat precocious edelweiss.
Swiss nights speckled with starlight they cuddle together,
their thermal passion orange below,
distant galaxies uncaring above
(His parents reject her, a peasant's daughter,
not even German.
They pay no heed;
together they are complete.)
Mileva, Mileva,
In a world still wondrous
still not saddened and made old by war,
barbed wire and trenches yet a whisper
of a dream,
the secret dance of neutrons secret still.
A stillness in a world of relative motion,
of festive cities, gaily colored;
poised in the crystalline perfection of luminiferous ether,
anything seems possible.
Oh, Mileva, Mileva, little singer, little doll,
with your deep brown eyes and your dark
and moody silences
Where are you now
now the world is old?

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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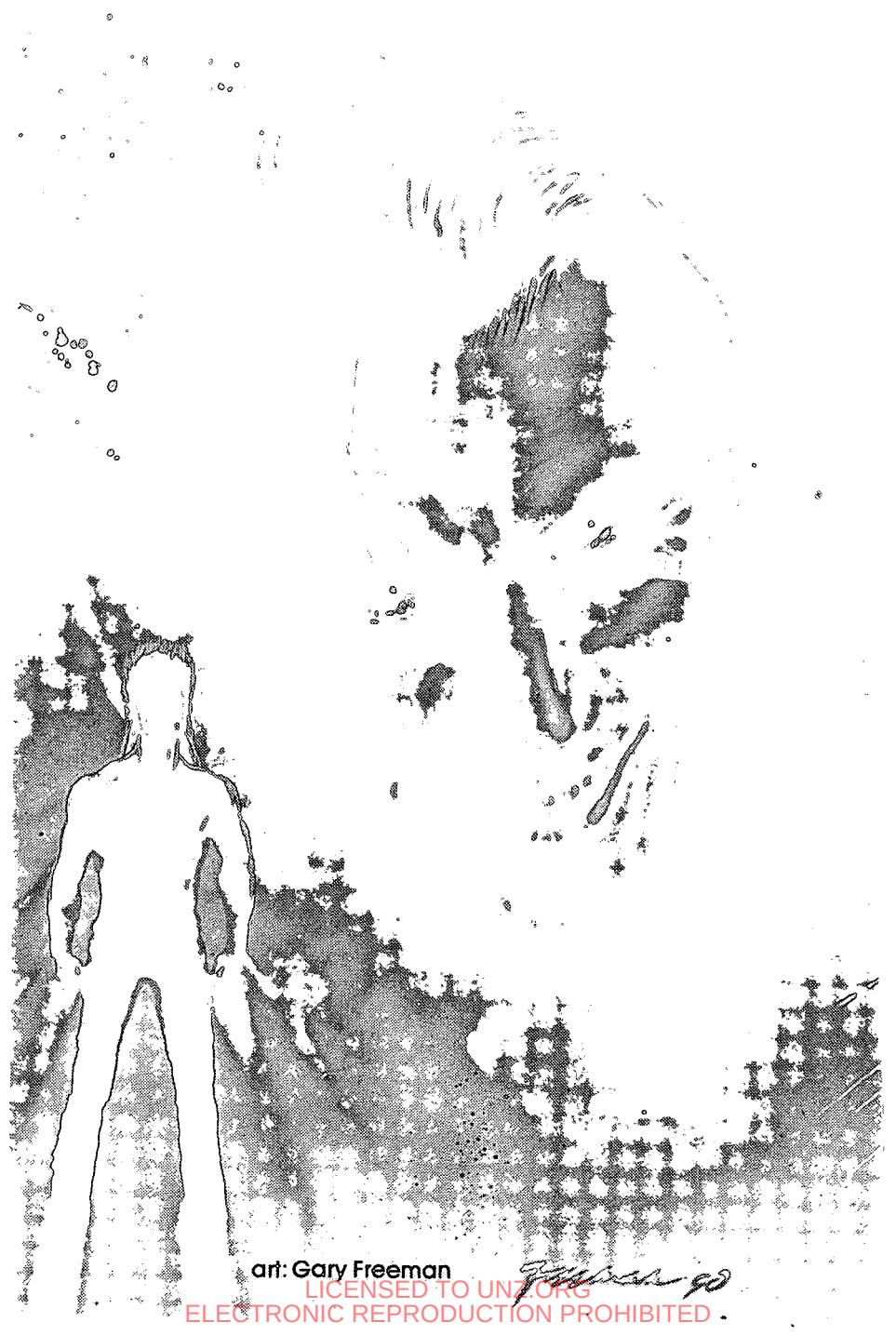

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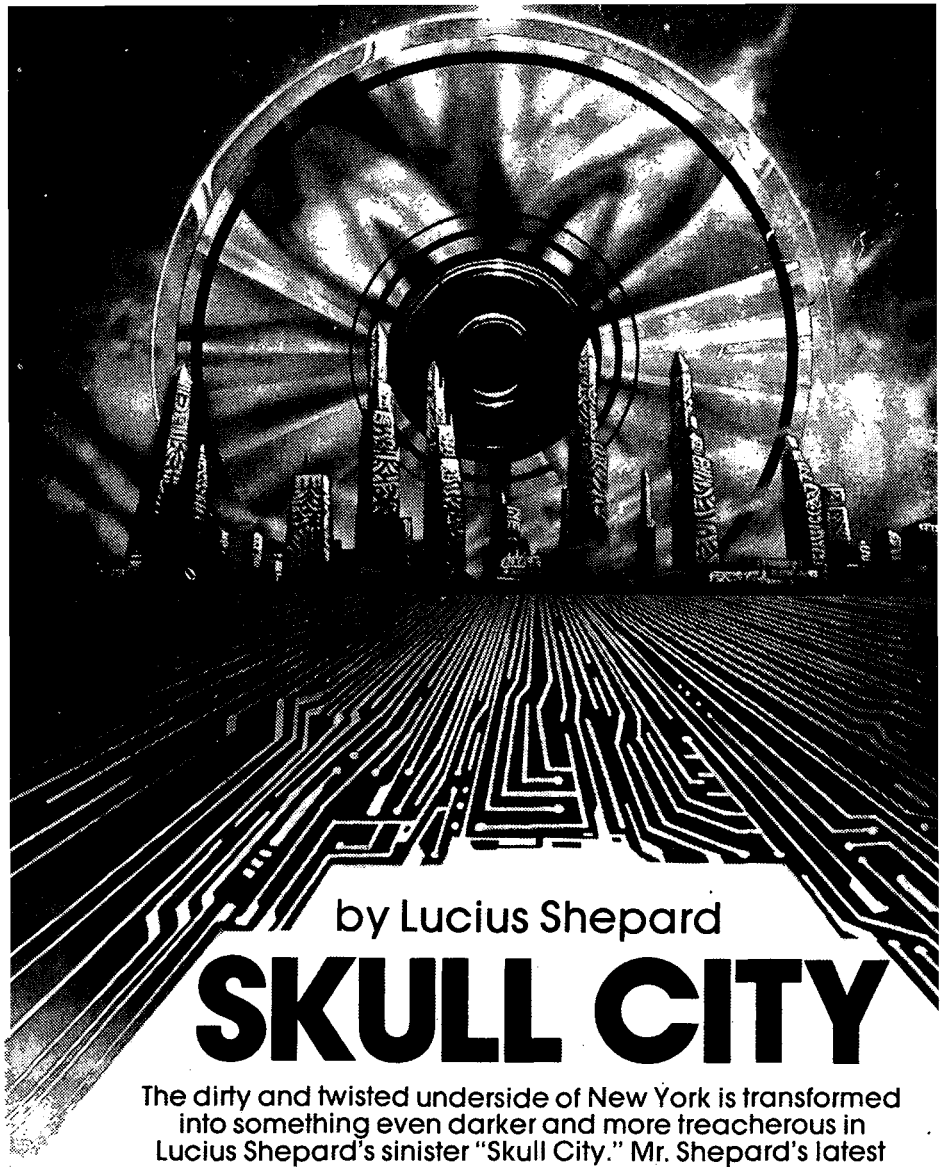

by Lucius Shepard

SKULL CITY

The dirty and twisted underside of New York is transformed into something even darker and more treacherous in Lucius Shepard's sinister "Skull City." Mr. Shepard's latest collection of short stories, *The Ends of the Earth,* is forthcoming from Arkham House, and his next novel, *The Off Season,* will be out soon from Ziesing.

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I was a beat artist in those days, nineteen and not looking to make twenty-one. Mostly I hung out in Alphabet City, but once in a while I'd wander over into the West Village, though my confidence was never quite the same that side of Broadway. Like I remember this one time I followed some fat old bitch for must have been fifteen blocks, my eyes pinned to her purse, but couldn't ever work up the nerve to snatch it. And I was hurting, man, let me tell you, I was really hurting. I needed to score five thirties every day just to keep from being sick, and that was no snap, because even when the crime business was paying, you could always count on some fuck trying to take you off. It wasn't existing, man, it was slime-ing. I suppose I was pretty good at it, but it wasn't anything you could stay good at for long.

There's this big porno store over on Seventh Avenue where all the yuppies come to buy their sex toys, and one February night I trailed this nice-looking yuppette from the store into the darkness near Charlton Place, grabbed her briefcase and sent her spinning down onto the pavement, shrieking for help. "This is the Rotton Apple, bitch!" I shouted at her. "The fuckin' Poison Apple! No help will come!" As I hurried away I began emptying the case. There were three shiny new vibrators in among the papers and files, and that gave me a chuckle, because my yuppette had been wearing a wedding band—I'd nearly yanked the sucker off in our brief struggle—and you had to wonder how the ol' marriage was doing in light of her investment in double A batteries. I ducked into an alley, tossed the vibrators and the briefcase, and opened her wallet. There weren't many bills, and at first I thought I'd picked a loser, but then I saw that four of the bills were hundreds. Sick as I was, I felt lit up inside. I was holding $460. Three days of staying straight or two of big fun.

I broke one of the hundreds at a pharmacy on Sheridan Square and bought an Ace bandage. I put ninety in my jacket pocket and hid the rest beneath the bandage, which I wrapped about my knee—the places where I copped, it was wise to keep your dope money separate from your reserve. Then I rode a cab uptown to Eighth Avenue and Thirty-Seventh Street, the Minnesota Strip, neon rows of arcades and x-rated movie houses and pizza joints, underage hookers and hustlers, everybody walking with an eye out for what's behind them. Upstairs of one arcade was a store run by a fake Rastaman named Pepper . . . you know, this guy had the nasty dreadlocks, the red, green, and black hat, the accent, all the frills, but in actuality he was a homeboy from Bed-Stuy. What you did at Pepper's, you waited in this dingy brown room with a few busted chairs and cracks in the walls and a ratty carpet smelled like piss, and soon a toady would come out and you'd give him your cash, and then he'd go fetch your goods. Take his freaking time about it, too. The crap that goes down in the back rooms of those places, it's a mystery. I mean what can they be doing in there while you're fucked up and twitching? Learning to count? Talking sports? Or is it just the usual junkie garbage?

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Mental defective arguments over trivia, with the picture on the TV flipping in the background, and nobody's got the energy to fix it.

Only two other people were waiting at Pepper's that night—it was early yet. There was a teenage black girl in a fatigue jacket, and a guy in his forties with pocked, caved-in cheeks and stringy gray hair, who was shivering and staring at the toes of his shoes. I recalled having run into him over on Greenwich Avenue—that skull face with its big yellow teeth and contemptuous expression was unforgettable. Guy was called Cooge, short for Cugielmo, and word had it he was some sort of genius with music, with rock and roll. A goddamn can of tomatoes, now, can seem like a genius to a junkie, especially when he's flying high. You know how it is, they're talking that talk, finger-popping, trying to make you believe that they're hanging out with all manner of wonderfully exotic folk, that their lifestyle is the product of enlightened choice. It's not much different from how the yuppies are always saying they love New York. What a crock! Most yuppies I know don't even fucking live in New York, they're hiding out there, paying two, three K a month for a security building with a doorman, never stooping below the thirteenth floor, eating peacock tits glacé at Lutèce and riding cabs everywhere. They indulge in the pretense that they're dwelling at the corner of Sewage and Great Art, immersed in that brilliant confluence, and that it takes a special breed—of which they are one—to endure the terrible yet oh so stimulating stresses that ensue, whereas in truth "I Love New York" is simply a mantra they've learned to chant in order to validate the dread caution of their lives. . . . But anyhow, like I was going to say, considering the source, I'd never given much credence to the rumors of Cooge's genius, yet neither could I totally disregard them, because according to rumor the man supported a nice habit without ever having resorted to crime, and that was in itself, as far as I was concerned, a form of genius. So I scoped him out pretty good while we were sitting in that grungy room with its tattered cobwebs and rat turds and hundred-year-old stinks, inspecting him for signs of abnormality and wondering what his secret could be. I was about to strike up a conversation, thinking it might be wise to ingratiate myself with the man, when the outer door banged open and in walked this Rican kid who looked sicker than all three of us put together, sweaty and pale and shaking so violently he could barely hang onto the little silver automatic he was pointing at us.

"C'mon," he said, jabbing the air with the muzzle. "C'mon, get it up, assholes!"

You don't want to be arguing with anybody who's sweating that badly in the middle of winter, so Cooge and me, we tossed him our cash, but the black girl, she just cowered and kept saying that she didn't got no coin, she was planning to trade some trim for her goods, and the Rican he was getting crazy, staring at my ninety bucks and Cooge's roll and saying, "This all you got? Bullshit, man! I tol' you to get it fuckin' up, so c'mon with it, man!"

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"Goddamn it! Don't be messin' around!" I said to the black girl. "Give him somethin'!"

Her chin was quivering, her eyes were round as an owl's, but she refused to budge on the matter of handing over her cash, and I doubt we would have walked out alive if one of Pepper's minions, this pimply white guy wearing a Giants sweatshirt, hadn't come through the inner door at that moment. The Rican fired, missing him by a hair, and then flung himself down the stairs. The pimply guy whipped out his own piece from beneath the sweatshirt and gave chase, but the Rican must have hit the street and vanished, because there were no further shots. After a second the pimply guy came back in, trying to act like the shooting had been no big thing, but his voice was unsteady and the pimples stood out on his pasty skin like a Connect-The-Dots puzzle. He shoved his piece into his belt and asked us for our orders, our bucks. The black girl shot me a scornful look and forked over some folded bills that she'd stashed in her panties.

"Listen," Cooge said to the pimply guy. He got to his feet; he was scratching the back of one wrist hard enough to start peeling skin, and his nose was dripping. "How 'bout frontin' me a couplá thirties 'til tomorrow? Guy took me off for all my cash."

He had a weak, high-pitched voice that, I came to learn, had in every situation an implicit tone of querulous demand and made him sound like a cross between a sick old man and a whiny boy.

"You know better'n that," said the pimply guy; having somebody to dump on had acted to restore his nerve. "Money talks and bullshit walks."

"I swear I'm good for it, man."

"Whyn't you use your bank card, get some more cash?"

"I don't have a damn bank card," Cooge told him. "What'm I s'posed to do? Get that ripped off too? C'mon, Pepper's fronted me before. Just ask him."

"Pepper ain't here. You get up the cash tomorrow mornin' and come on back then."

"I'll be fuckin' sicker'n shit by then, you son of a bitch! Your security was half-ass, I wouldn't be . . ."

The pimply guy gave him a shove toward the door and stalked after him. "Whaddaya callin' me, sweetheart? Callin' me a son of a bitch?"

Cooge's attitude turned from the defiant to the pathetic. "Christ, c'mon, man! Look, I'll pay you double for two thirties, awright? I'll pay you double tomorrow."

"Get fuckin' real!" The pimply guy steered him toward the door.

Cooge pulled away from him. Strands of hair were stuck to the sweat on his forehead, his skin was going gray, his eyes were shiny and black. "I wanna see Pepper!"

"I told ya he ain't aroun', awright? Now get outta here!"

"I'll front ya a coupla thirties," I said to Cooge.

He flashed me a look in which paranoia and relief were fighting for dominance.

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"You 'member me," I said. "I'm a friend of Skates, I metcha coupla times over on Greenwich Ave."

"Oh, yeah," he said, still wary. "Yeah. Larson. That's your name, isn't it . . . Larson?"

"Listen, man. Don't get the wrong idea. I ain't no Mother Theresa. I just need a place to crash tonight. I mean I could do a hotel, but seein' you a friend of Skates, I figger I help you out, you help me out, okay? I know you're good for the coin."

What I had said was more or less the truth, but I also was starting to believe, to feel in my bones, that by helping him I might do myself some real good.

"Yeah, awright, cool," he said, warming to the idea. "I gotta sofa you can use."

"I won't be no problem. I just need somewheres I can fall out and stare at the wallpaper."

I gave him my best boyish grin, and after a moment he grinned back. The man really didn't have much choice in the matter.

I can't explain how it was I knew Cooge and me were going to have a future. Some kind of junkie ESP, maybe. The antennae going up when you sense that due to a conjunction of time and stars, somebody is ripe to be used. Whatever, I stayed at Cooge's house—a brownstone on Charles Street—that night and the next and a few more nights after that, running errands, doing some cooking and cleaning, taking care of his bills and such. He was incompetent at dealing with day-to-day life, and it became apparent that we were becoming an item, a doper Odd Couple. I'd fallen into this sort of symbiotic relationship before, but never with anyone with whom I'd care to spend more than a week or so; however, since Cooge was a man of means and thus capable of keeping me high, I determined to make myself indispensable, and, without sucking up to him too much, because I knew that would just get him leery, I took over the dog work of the house and left him to tinker in his workshop.

About a week after that night at Pepper's we made it official. It was a rainy Friday afternoon, the spattered windows throwing stippled opaque reflections over the linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor, and I was sitting at the breakfast table, spacing on the incredible white depths of the porcelain sink, coming down from a rush that had taken me right to the edge, into the beautiful slow panic of a hair too much, when Cooge shuffled in, sunken cheeks and hollow eyes and yellow teeth, all framed by that mane of stringy dead hair, a mad zombie scientist in a sweatshirt and jeans, with a microchip board dangling from his bony fingers. He flopped into the chair opposite me and muttered something I didn't catch.

"Whatcha say, man?" I asked, the words slopping out like some heavy spoiled liquid. I could hardly keep my eyes open, I was so deep into the sweet blankness of my drug. The rain was picking up outside, beginning to drip steadily from the eaves, and horns were sounding from the direction of Hudson Street, signaling a traffic snarl.

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"I wanna know whass goin' on."

Judging by his burred voice, he was as stoned as I was.

"What's goin' on, huh?" I was amused by the scope of the question. "Y'mean like now?"

"I mean all this here." He made a sluggish gesture that took in the rack of freshly washed dishes. "What you want from me?"

I recognized Cooge's symptoms. I had made life easier for him, and his junkie paranoia required him to suspect some devious motive. I tried to marshall tactics, logic.

"It ain't about nothin'," I told him. "I'm helpin' you, you helpin' me."

"I don't need your damn help!"

"I come in here, man, the place smells like a dump, I find shit growin' in the sink looks like a freakin' science fiction movie. Roaches're havin' a party everywhere you turn. Christ, they so goddamn happy they might start up a fuckin' resort. You 'bout to get your telephone and 'lectricity cut off. There's payments overdue on 'bout every fuckin' thing you own. You missin' appointments, your accountant's beggin' ya to get your tax shit together." I made a noise of disgust. "Hell, no, you don't need no help."

He started to say something, but I talked right through him:

"I know I ain't nothin' but a piece of shit. Now I got terrific reasons for bein' a piece of shit. My daddy's bangin' my sister and whalin' the crap outta me. I mean I didn't have no choice 'cept to split from home."

Cooge rolled his eyes, and I knew how lame I must sound.

"But no matter what's the reasons," I went on, beginning to get a little desperate, "I ain't gonna deny I'm a bad risk. A year ago, you roll down my alley, and hey . . . I cut you for a fuckin' nickel, man. Now I ain't gonna try and convince ya I've changed. But I am wiser'n I used to be, and I know a good thing when I see it. This place, man, I can see it's fallin' apart, and I say to myself, fuckin' Cooge, man, he needs somebody to handle his bullshit so he can get on with whatever he's doin' for-real. I figure if maybe I can be that somebody, it gets me off the street, y'know. Like I don't have to be beatin' nobody over the head no more. I can take care of my jones. Maybe I can even think about gettin' straight." I paused for breath. "Y'know damn well that's what's been happenin' here, y'know if I was gonna rip you off I'd be gone by now. So what's bitin' your ass, man? My work not satisfyin' ya?"

Cooge sat studying me for a moment. "Even honesty's a shuck with you, man. You think you can manipulate me, you're crazy."

He said this deliberately, flatly, as if it were something of which he was reminding himself, and I couldn't deny any part of it. I was thin back then, man. Extremely thin. Just a sad story, a few bum reflexes, and this one big need.

"Hey!" I spread my hands as if to show I was holding no weapons. "Did I claim to be quality? Man, you need a stooge. Somebody to clean up your mess and laugh at your jokes. Who you expectin' to apply for the job . . . the Pope or somebody?"

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He gave a weak chuckle and appeared to be giving some thought to the situation. Finally he said, "I guess we can see how it goes. Tell the truth, I could use somebody 'round here."

"No shit!"

"Not like you think, man. I want a maid, I'll get it at the fuckin' employment agency. What I'm really lookin' for's an assistant."

I asked what sort of gig "assistant" would be, and he said, "You like music, Larson? Jazz, rock and roll . . . all that?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then you're perfect for the job, 'cause all I wantcha to do is listen to some music."

His death's-head face was expressionless but seemed to have acquired an even more sinister aspect than usual, and I had a flutter of anxiety. I felt the weight of that curious house closing down around me as if the walls were cinching together in a knot.

"What kinda music?" I asked.

"My kind." He grinned. "You'll love it."

The silence that followed this last statement had a special valence—it was strong and heavy, like how it comes when you're creeping around at night in Central Park, the only sound the crunch of your footsteps, and then you stop and listen because you could swear you feel something bad on your track. I heard a clock ticking in the next room, little creaks and sighs from all over the house.

"You tryin' to fuck with my mind?" I said.

Cooge gathered his long hair into a ponytail, kicked back in his chair and regarded me with distaste. "Somebody's always fuckin' with your mind, cool. Don't tell me you ain't used to it."

"I was just hopin' we could skip the bullshit games, y'know."

He spat out a diffident, wasted laugh and with a mixture of venom and condescension, as if speaking to a difficult retarded child, he said, "Promise me one thing, Larson, my man. Stay as sweet as you are, okay?"

I had a flash of morbid comprehension then, sensing that we were on a twisted road toward no good destination, but I was too relieved to let it trouble me for long.

I've said that the house was curious, but it was merely a shadow of Cooge's nature, for he and not any of his possessions was the true curiosity of the place. At the time I couldn't have put into words what I felt about him, why he struck me as being more perverse than the rest of the perverts who made up my world, but looking back, I realize that there was about him an aura of potency, of being in control, that was not in keeping with the usual template of junkie behavior. I got the idea then that his addiction was an affectation, that he considered it an interesting color to add to the palette of his personality, and I came increasingly to suspect his motives for offering me shelter. There was something gloating in the way he treated me, as if he knew my secret weakness and was planning to exploit it. To a degree I chalked this up to the character of

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our relationship—he was the one with all the bucks, and given the mean-spiritedness of our milieu, it was natural that he assert his superiority. I assumed that soon he would grow overtly assertive and try to box me into the role of a menial, whereas I would aspire to the position of faithful companion. Yet I couldn't shake the notion that more was going on between us than met the eye.

Following our kitchen conversation, I did some asking around out on the street and learned that Cooge had been a record producer. Big time. He'd worked with Guns 'n Roses, Slayer, lots of the metal bands, as well as old timers such as Roberta Flack and George Harrison. It seemed that along the path he had gotten deep into Satanism; of course this fit right in with the moral tone of the industry, so no one had been put off. He had quit show biz in order to do research into an independent project, but what that might be, nobody knew. I could learn nothing to persuade me that he was being less than straight where I was concerned. The man's seriously askew, was the word, but he won't fuck you over. Usually pays up front for his dope. Never known to fink. Like that. But though my informants were open with me, I noticed that they exhibited a certain anxiety in my company and were not interested in hanging out, as if my association with Cooge had contaminated me in some way . . . this even in the case of old pals.

My instincts told me to flee, that this shunning by my peers might signal yet another operation of junkie telepathy; they might, I thought, sense imminent disaster and were trying to save themselves. But I couldn't turn down the free ride. I told myself if things started getting hinkey, I'd be out of there, and I kept careful track of Cooge's movements, inspected his mail (mainly bills and checks), and noted all the comings and goings in the house. Our most frequent visitors were five long-haired, weedy guys in a band that Cooge was recording: Skull City. Sometimes I'd hear them practicing in the workshop. Their music was ponderous stuff without much real energy—a wedding of metal and fusion. Now and then they'd play a straight-ahead rock tune. They never said shit to me and treated me like I was some kind of growth, but I could have given a fuck. Slack-jawed assholes with the complexions of supermarket turkeys. The way they strutted, you could tell they thought they were the next big thing; but judging by Cooge's deferential attitude, I figured he was merely using them to try out some equipment or flesh out some other facet of his pet project.

I passed the days watching videos, drifting through the hours with a fortune in my veins, and I wasted a good deal of time goofing on the house. Each room was decorated in accordance with some fantasy of Cooge's. One was designed to look like hell on earth, furnished with bean bag chairs that resembled purplish boulders and a mural on the walls that depicted the ruins of the Manhattan skyline against a fiery sky in which winged horrors were sporting, bearing tiny humans in their beaks—the word Dys was written in Gothic script in the lower left hand corner of one wall. There was an attic with a skylight beneath which

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flourished tubs of ferns and orchids and other jungly plants, grotesque statues of beasts and subhumans peering from among them; there was a windowless cell with padded black leather walls and chairs of white bone with chrome joints facing an array of synthesizers and amps set in sculpted iron frames, seeming less instruments of music than of torture. Music was the only thing common to all the rooms. They were fitted with speakers, strewn about with guitars and flutes and so forth, a musical litter that spilled throughout the house from its central source—Cooge's workshop, which consisted of three rooms on the third floor whose connecting walls had been knocked out from time to time. My first impression of the space was that some crazy had broken in and destroyed a lot of valuable machinery. Skulls, pentagrams, and other weird-looking shit had been spraypainted on the walls, and apart from the twenty-four track recording set-up, there were piles of wiring and patch cords and microchips and all manner of electronic garbage scattered over long wooden tables and the floor, along with panels and keyboards and a copier and an IBM computer and tools of various sorts and a small safe in which Cooge kept a stack of the spiral-bound notebooks that he scribbled in. Tossed in among this litter were a number of tattered leather-bound books, some of them in Latin, a couple in Arabic, and when I asked Cooge what they were for, he just snickered and said, "Inspiration."

Late one afternoon I was going out to do some grocery shopping, when Cooge caught me at the front door and handed me a portable CD player with headphones and a disc already in place.

"Check this bad boy out," he said.

I gave the gear a once-over. "What is it?"

"Product," he said with what seemed inordinate good cheer. "My latest and greatest."

I had another glance at the player; a prism shifted along the silver surface of the disc. "This is where I start bein' an assistant, huh?"

Cooge grinned, shrugged. "Yeah."

His sprightliness struck a discord; I thought I detected an unhealthy glee underlying it.

"What's the deal?" I asked.

"Just put on the phones, man," said Cooge, his mood fraying. "Listen to it while you're goin' to the store."

"I'll listen when I get back."

"It's a fuckin' CD is all, man! Not a goddamn bomb. Now you gonna listen or what? 'Cause you definitely got an option!"

I hesitated. "So what do I do after?"

He made a noise of disgust. "Tell me if you like it, okay? Jesus!" He stalked off into the depths of the house.

I went out onto the front stoop and inspected the headphones. I was imagining that needles could pop out of them and go deep into my brain, and shit like that. But I couldn't detect any such trickery. Cooge's paranoia, I decided, must be catching. God only knew why he wanted me to listen to the disc while out for a walk, but it was ludicrous to assign

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him evil intent. The guy was a goddamn loon. Maybe he wanted me to hear it alone, without him looking on, so I could concentrate. Or maybe he believed the music would go better with the great outdoors. Could be it was simply a whim. Whatever, I wasn't about to let a little paranoia ruin my happy home. As I jogged down the steps and out onto Charles Street, I fitted the headphones to my ears, and swinging left onto Hudson, heading downtown, I switched on the music.

It was a chilly, raw March day with scatters of sleety rain. Black clouds had gathered above Brooklyn or Jersey or somewhere, and the sun—a silver dazzle roughly in the shape of a cross—seamed the divisions between them, making a dark and mysterious glory of the western sky. Most people were hurrying along with their collars turned up, faces muffled by scarves, skidding on glazes of dirty ice and kicking the crusts of sooty snow that marbled the curbs; but me, once the music kicked in, I started ambling along like a boulevardier in spring on the Champs Elysée. I felt warm and mellow, easy rocking, just like the r&b feel of the tune. A truly dumb-ass tune, not one of Skull City's more imaginative efforts. It was about this swell mystic boogie night club down south—the Martinique—where all kinds of wonderful hippiesque miracles were likely to happen. But I loved it, anyway. It must be, I thought, Cooge had figured out a way of incorporating subliminals into the recording process, some weirdness that made you identify emotionally with whatever garbage the band played, because I knew if I'd heard this song on the radio, I would have changed stations immediately, and as it was, I was so behind the music, I had the urge to find a bar and have a few pops in hopes that some of the radical stuff the band was singing about would happen to me. Which was just what I proceeded to do.

The nearest place, thus the one I chose, was the Blitz Cafe, a Hudson Street oasis that catered to Eurotrash, and served an indifferent nouvelle cuisine. The bar was decorated in insipid post-modern style. Pink neon sculptures on the walls, black leatherette padding on the bar-facing, music videos on large-screen TVs, an abstract photo-mural, and a few pertinently situated potted palms. Everything squeaky clean and shiny. The sort of place that implies life is a germ-free cabaret, that American culture can be reduced to an oblique statement of hipness and cool youth atremble. On entering, however, instead of the androgynous minimalist chaos of the Blitz, I was met with the pungent, funky atmosphere of the Martinique. Ornate cane chairs; candlelit tables set in niches curtained off from the dance floor with strands of ruby beads; omegas of cigarette smoke coiling in the indigo air. On an elevated stage at the rear, pinned by a hot spotlight, a fat sweaty black man wearing a blue silk suit embroidered with peacock designs was blowing sax, bent so far backward that his head nearly touched the floor, as if drinking from his golden horn; his back-up band was a menagerie of glints and shadows, cooking up a shimmering bluesy stew upon which his solo floated like a streak of blood (music, I should add, that was none other than the stylings of Skull City). To my right was a mahogany bar that had the plush curve

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and dimensionality of a yacht's hull, and sitting there among a motley of swarthy, gold-toothed pimps and pale asthenic men in evening jackets were six young ladies wearing parrot-green dresses, who were sipping what looked to be glasses of neon gin and casting restless glances about the room. Dim figures enveloped in musky perfume slipped past and vanished in the murk. I caught bright scents of spices and ozone. Out on the dance floor I saw satin-sheathed buttocks with hands clutching them like pallid starfish, I saw hate in a glass of beer, I saw that there could be no beauty without affliction, I saw the future on a tattooed breast. I saw far too much weirdness to believe in any of it, yet though I recognized that none of what I saw and felt was quite kosher, I was so into the song playing in my head, at the same time I felt that my being there was absolutely righteous, that everything in the club was real. Nevertheless I did notice something that unsettled me. As they moved about and mingled, the patrons were trailed by glimmering afterimages—like faint phosphorescent sketches—that did not coincide with the conformation of their bodies, as if they each were two different people, one a fleshy ideal, beautiful and exotic, and the other an imperfect spirit or ghost. I realized that I must have such an afterimage myself, though I was unable to catch sight of it. I had changed somehow . . . I knew it to my soul. I was no longer confused and vague with drugs; I felt clear and directed in every particular, still a hustler, but now motivated by desire and confidence rather than—as had been the case—by fear and need.

I strolled over to the bar and had a seat next to one of the women in green, a choice specimen with milky skin and tumbles of black hair and pretty avocado-sized tits pushed up in their satin shells like French desserts. Her carmined mouth was invitation to think dirty, and her green irises were dappled with gold, making me think of jungle sun and bamboo shade. She smelled of violets and derangement. At the corner of her lips was a round beauty mark like a drop of obsidian, and there was something evil about the serenity of her cameo face. When I say "evil," I'm not using the word in the sense of the dissolute and the disorganized, the ruling evil principles of the pimped-out, ripped-off, trashed dimension that I had inhabited ever since leaving home. This woman had a quality of sharp, focused menace, of a sensibility that exulted in its capacities and lusts, and I would have been frightened of her if I had not felt similar capacities and lusts within myself—it was as if by looking into her face I had been awakened to the presence of a dynamic malevolent force that had been incubating within my flesh, and realizing this, I was charged with the urge to work my will upon her. I had in mind to say something annoying, but before I could think of the proper insult, she pooched up those fellatrix lips into a pout and told me that if I was going to buy her a drink, fine . . . if not, would I mind moving along?

"What'll ya gimme if I buy ya the drink, babycakes?" I asked her. "A dread disease?"

"You're really sick, baby," she said. "But I can respect that." She got

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up from the barstool with the sinuous deliberation of a snake rising from a charmer's basket and began to sway, to snap her fingers in rhythm with Skull City's backbeat. "So how 'bout it? You wanna dance?" Her afterimage seemed to be cowering.

As we danced, rubbing up against one another in a kind of frictive violence, I noticed that her afterimage was reeling, its head snapping back as if absorbing a punch, but I was too aroused to pay it any mind. Not at first, anyway. Before long, however, the song began to fade, and simultaneously the afterimage began to solidify, acquiring rudimentary features and hints of coloration. And then, as the song ended, the woman vanished—like an projection that had been switched off—and I found myself back in the Blitz, the headphones dangling from my neck, confronting a pale, dazed-looking youth with an exciting haircut that combined the aspects of a rooster's comb and the classic pageboy. His face greatly resembled that of the woman in green. He was wearing clothes off a SoHo rack. You know, the sport jacket with the push-up sleeves, the Italian T-shirt, the baggy slacks. And he was bleeding heavily from the mouth and nose. He let out a breathy shriek and recoiled. I realized that my fist was drawn back and I was about to nail the little squinch. Despite being severely disoriented, I judged from the abraded condition of my knuckles that I had already nailed him several times. A yuppie bartender with short dark hair and a choleric expression was bearing down on me, brandishing one of those miniature baseball bats they sell for souvenirs at Yankee Stadium, and though I was not certain as to the extent of my culpability, I recognized the need for invention.

"Hey, whoa, man!" I said, backing away. "The guy grabbed my willie, awright! What'm I s'posed to do . . . smile and say, 'Hi, neighbor'?"

"I didn't touch him!" shrilled the bleeder. "All I . . ."

"Fuck you didn't!" I said; then, to the bartender: "It's like he was checkin' out the zucchini at the market, y'know!"

My victim started to raise another objection, but the bartender, who had been confused by my accusation, shouted, "Awright! Both of youse . . . outta here! Right now!"

"No problemo." I headed for the door. "Next time I wanna massage, I'll make a reservation, okay?"

To this point I had been reacting rather blithely to everything that had happened, and I kept expecting to be afflicted by some post-traumatic tremor—weak knees, at the least, or a rush of adrenaline—because it had been quite a shock to be flipped back and forth between the Martinique and the Blitz. Yet I suffered no such reaction, maintaining an introspective calm, and I set myself to figuring out what kind of trip Cooge had put me on. It would have been easy to dismiss the whole thing as a hallucination of some sort, but I couldn't make that scenario fit the experience. Just as I had been unable to accept Cooge's attitudes toward me at face value, I could not accept that the events of the afternoon were as simple as they had appeared. I decided to play it dumb when I returned home and to see what the man had to say before I made any judgments.

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More significantly, I began to examine not only my immediate situation, but my entire circumstance, inspired to do so, I believe, by a lingering strain of the arrogance that had governed me during my stay at the Martinique—I believe that until this moment I hadn't had the stomach to face up to what I'd become. Living like a rat in Cooge's maze; devoid of self-esteem . . . except for the pride in being crafty enough to survive in a rat's world; obeying a powerful urge toward self-destruction. Amoral, indulgent, worthless. Violent. It was a wonder, given the extent of my emotional malnutrition, that I hadn't offed somebody yet, that I hadn't gotten into death as a marketing concept. I was repelled by this glimpse of myself, and I decided to take steps to improve both my character and my lot. Careful, considered steps. Not the desperate acts that ordinarily would have occurred to me. It wasn't exactly a plan, just a formal intent, but it was the closest thing to a plan I'd ever had, and reflected a comprehension of the fact that if I didn't do something quickly to change my ways, I would not be long for this world.

This clarity I experienced was not merely a matter of interior focus. As I walked down Hudson in the gathering dark, it was as if I were seeing the Village for the first time, noticing in detail all the sweet dementia and careless hustle of the place. The White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas had died after eighteen straight whiskies, yuppies cavorting behind its steamed windows, toasting one another with Finnish vodka and Guinness at five bucks a pint; Korean deli with flower bins out front, an employee kneeling beside one of them, arranging chrysanthemums, sainted by a spill of white light; cabs weaving through rush hour traffic, honking, wild yellow metal beasts spraying melted snow water; the homeless shuffling, dressed in a layered shabbiness of old coats, sweaters, and skirts, baggies for gloves, so common a sight, they had come to seem like a kind of weather; a blond giant in lumberjack drag; punk midnight girl in a leotard, black lips, cadaverous eyes, and lovely breasts, leafing through the *Voice* personal ads; two TVs in cocktail dresses and ratty fur stoles—people as exotic in their differences as the food at a gourmet market. And lording it over all, lending the Village a relative intimacy, the towers of Manahatta, looming into a blue-dark sky, geometric constellations with hundreds of lit windows for stars, powerful symbols of another world . . . or that was how I perceived them, because just as they existed in my sky, I lived in their depths and couldn't imagine how it would be to inhabit them.

Seeing all this, breathing in that chill air reeking of burning oil and fevers, I felt alive in a new way. Challenged and dissatisfied. Full of new and compelling needs, none of which I completely understood. But one thing was certain—I wanted to rule and not be ruled, I wanted a chunk of this big nasty hive for my own. If under ordinary circumstances I had assessed my chances of exercising power over my environment, I would have thought it a ludicrous presumption; but I was beginning to accept that the circumstances were far from ordinary. The change I had sensed in myself while at the Martinique must, I thought, signal a true change,

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a falling away of the scales from my eyes; and if it were, then whatever Cooge had done to me might well be the cause of that change. I doubted he would be straight with me about any of it; he had his own agenda where I was concerned. And so, having no choice in the matter, having no other avenue for improvement, for drastic change, I decided to steal his secrets.

On my return to the house I pretended to be wiped out, frantic, and Cooge, who was writing down what I said in one of his notebooks, appeared disappointed in me. After I had finished, he asked if I didn't feel different, and I said, "Shit, yeah, man! I feel like I been fuckin' sandbagged, y'know. You fuckin' sent me out into heavy traffic wearin' a goddamn blindfold!"

We were sitting in the room with the purple bean bag chairs and the mural of a hellish, ruined New York, and once I had finished this last outburst, I spun about and started out the door.

"Where you think you goin'?" he shouted, coming after me.

"Man, I need this gig, okay, and I don't mind cleanin' up your messes. But I ain't about to get myself killed just for your fuckin' amusement!"

"Nobody's gonna get killed."

"You got that right!"

"Okay, man! Okay!" Cooge held up his hands in a gesture intended to placate, to soothe. "Maybe I shoulda been more up front."

I snorted in derision.

"I'm sorry, okay?" he went on. "Next time I'll . . ."

"Next time? Screw that shit! Ain't gon' be no next time."

"Just listen, awright? Lemme explain. Hang on a minute."

I pretended to be somewhat mollified. "So . . . I'm listenin'."

Cooge appeared to be gathering his thoughts, and I interrupted the process by saying, "Don't be bullshittin' me, man. You don't bullshit me, maybe we can work somethin' out."

I wasn't sure how much he needed me, or how much gas he would take . . . not a hell of a lot more, going by his tight-lipped stare. But I intended to push him as hard as possible, because—though I didn't believe he would be candid—I figured that the harder I pushed, the more likely he might be to let slip a portion of the truth embedded in a lie.

"Oh, I wouldn't try and bullshit you, Larson," he said, flopping onto one of the bean bag chairs. "Perceptive guy like you. But you tell anybody 'bout this, man, and I will fuck with you, unnerstan'?"

I said, "Uh-huh," and dropped into a chair beside him.

"Ever hear 'bout those records s'posed to have secret shit recorded on 'em? Y'know, like with Led Zeppelin. Shit if you played it backward, the vocal was s'posed to say, 'I love Satan' . . . stuff like that?"

I nodded.

"I was doin' that kinda thing a few years back. It was just a giggle, but I got deep into it. The Devil's music, y'know. I thought it'd be cool to make that real . . . if maybe it was real, if alla time people been sayin'

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rock and roll's the Devil's music, and here I go and find out that's what it really is."

"Devil worship's a giggle?" I arched an eyebrow. "Ri-ight!"

"Wasn't no big thing. I was into the devil, okay, but not serious, man. Just part of my image. This one time, though, I was really ripped and I got an idea, like what if I was to work a real spell into the music . . . would it have any effect?"

"Gimme a break!"

"Square business, man! I ain't sayin' it doesn't sound nuts, but just hang with me. Maybe it'll start makin' sense."

Cooge squirmed about in his chair and gazed up to the painted sky, at a thing with a fly's faceted eyes and a vulture's wattles and leathery wings that was diving toward the shattered towers of Manhattan.

"I got fuckin' obsessed with the idea. First I put down background vocal tracks in Latin, Arabic. Conjuring spells and like that. But that didn't do diddley, so I got this guy who's a math genius. A music guy, but he knew math too. He transcribed some of the spells into math, then turned the math into music. We ran instrumental tracks playin' what he'd come up with into the mixes of a coupla songs, and both of 'em hit number one. And the second song, man, it was a real fuckin' dog. Absolute piece of shit."

"People'll eat up what you think is shit. It coulda been a coincidence."

"Yeah, but I did it half-a-dozen more times. Worked in every case. And we found out we weren't the first to be doin' this. Like there's a whole buncha records datin' back to the Fifties that used some of the same shit we were usin'. I mean it was inadvertant with them, y'know. Like they didn't quite get it right. But . . . see, some of the spells we used, part of 'em translated into real heavy backbeats and certain kinds of modulation and crap like that. And lotsa these records, stuff by Elvis and the Stones, the Beatles, Jerry Lee Lewis, they all had rough versions in 'em of what we were doin'. We figured that's why their tunes went over so good. Who knows? Maybe the man who invented rock and roll was into Satan, maybe he did a real trip on everybody and kept it to himself."

"How come you stopped?"

"I had all the money I needed, and I didn't give a damn 'bout workin' in the studio anymore. What's the challenge when you can do platinum every time out? I wanted to learn what was goin' on with this shit."

"So what is goin' on?"

"I'm gettin' there . . . be cool." Cooge let his head loll and closed his eyes, looking for the moment like a disinterred corpse. "I couldn't unnerstan' why the spells worked like they did, but I noticed that people picked up on my songs faster'n they did with most. If two or three radios was playin', they'd gravitate to the one playing my tune every time. This friend of mine, he was jokin' around one day; and he said maybe the music was affectin' their ears different. What the hey, I said. Let's test 'em while they're listenin'. Turned out that when people listened to my music their EKGs went screwy. There was this kind of echo. I figured

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maybe I could find a way to build the spells into the recording equipment—maybe even the instruments and amps. I thought that might make the effect stronger. So I started designing circuit boards and microchips and digital recorders that had analogs of spells built into 'em. Took lotsa trial and error, tryin' out different spells and all, different ways of working patterns into the circuitry, but I finally come up with somethin' that did more'n create a screwy EKG. And that's what you listened to."

"That ain't exactly explainin' what happened," I said.

"I'm not sure how to explain it. But it's no hallucination."

"Then what're we talkin' about?"

Cooge paused for dramatic effect, pinning me with a grave stare. "I think it's hell. I think the music puts you into hell."

This, I said to myself, is where the bullshit begins. However, I was satisfied that Cooge had been more-or-less candid until that point, and I did not want to push him further, figuring I could work out the rest on my own. I affected awe, shock, fear, all those reactions that I knew he would love.

"Thing you heard was a prototype," he went on. "It put you there 'bout halfway. You were gettin' more of the song's imagery than anything else. It's hard to explain what's really goin' on. I mean God knows what's really there, y'know. Things might be so weird in hell, we might not be able to unnerstan' what we're seein'. The songs just give you a structure to help you translate what's there into somethin' you can unnerstan'. But we're tryin' to do better at translatin'."

"You and the band, huh?"

"That's right."

"They know what's goin' on?"

He hesitated. "Not everything."

"So why tell me?"

"If you're gonna help, no way I can hide anything from you."

"You askin' me to do any more listenin'," I said, "then you can just shove it. I ain't goin' to hell for nobody."

"Just hold on, man!" said Cooge, and with the air of a State Farm agent trying to help out a widow with her financial future, he began trying to buy my assistance, offering more drugs, more money, and undying friendship.

I had no clear idea of what I might discover if I succeeded in getting to the bottom of Cooge's business, but the way I saw it, anything that could do a number on my head like that CD must have some righteous value. I let Cooge persuade me. We made a deal—he would pay me a living wage, keep supplying me with good smack, and reduce my menial duties; in return I would be his guinea pig. It may seem unreasonable that I would risk this for any reward, considering the possible dangers, but even if Cooge had been telling the truth about the music putting you into hell, it was no big deal. Nothing I had witnessed in the Martinique had impressed me as being as potentially tormenting as the ordinary

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terrors that I faced every day. Hell, it seemed, was a piece of cake compared to life in New York. And if greater terrors lay ahead, I could live with that—I'd never expected a shining fate, and I had no better prospects. There was, however, a logical inconsistency implicit in the deal that troubled me. Cooge must listen to the music himself, so what use would he have for a guinea pig? He must have some other purpose in mind for me. It was evidence of his contempt for my intelligence that he hadn't bothered to come up with a story that would take this flaw into account, but I had no intention of attempting to earn his respect. The dumber he thought I was, the better my chances of making a score.

The first part of my program involved cutting down on smack. It was amazing that I could even consider this, because never before had I thought quitting a reasonable option. What was the point, I'd figured, in denying yourself the only good medicine life had to offer? Yet I knew I couldn't pull off a complex deception while going on the nod half the fucking day, and so I went about the process of kicking. Cold turkey was out of the question. I couldn't swing the time off to go somewhere and be sick for a few days, and even if I could have, I wasn't certain my body could take the stress. So I reduced my chipping to maintenance level and traded my excess smack for Valiums to ease me through the rough spots. I had some truly abysmal moments, and it was difficult to disguise how sick I was, but within a month I'd pared my habit down to about twenty percent of what it had been, and I doubted I would have a problem in going the rest of the way.

During that month I listened to three more of Cooge's CDs. They were more sophisticated than the first, and their imagery was more compelling and believable—I figured that this signaled what Cooge would have called an improvement in the translation. For one thing, I no longer could see people's afterimages, though I sensed that they were in the air, as palpable as a bad vibe, and for another, the songs were all instrumentals and did not seem to enforce any particular activity such as entering a bar; they simply put me into this strange place where I would wander for a while, and for the most part I was either unaware of the music or else only peripherally aware of it. On awakening, I would find that I had removed the headphones and carried on with my life. The basic milieu of all three CDs was a city which, because of its evil aspect and its association with the band, I thought of as Skull City. It was big, as big as Manhattan, with even taller buildings. Bone-white towers shaped like obelisks with weird inscriptions and carvings covering almost every inch of the stone—cabalistic skyscrapers towering up into a leached blue-white void where black things similar to airplanes, but with moveable wings, swooped and soared. I couldn't figure out what they were, but I was fascinated by them—they reminded me of the apocalyptic mural of Manhattan on Cooge's walls. Dys. I wondered if the painting might be representational of an earlier translation. Even if it was, I didn't buy Cooge's assertion that Skull City was hell . . . though neither would I characterize it as Disney World. It had an ambience that made me think

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of a heavy metal fantasy, a badass mutant theme park—of course I knew I was only seeing a translation and the real thing was probably quite different. But from my explorations, I came to feel that the city had a more complex reality than would be incorporated into a place of torment, that it was every bit as intricate and sophisticated and morally ambiguous an environment as New York.

The streets were—though certain of them veered off at crooked angles and grew narrow as alleys—much like Manhattan streets, rife with stinks and garbage, with wailing music leaking from doorways and windows, thronged with pedestrian and motor traffic, yet there were no cabs or cars, only long black flatbed trucks driven by shadows (so it appeared through the smoked windows), their chrome grilles worked into bizarre emblems, all transporting dozens of passengers. The citizens of Skull City were human, but embodied a wider physical spectrum than did the citizens of the Big Apple, and their dress and activities, too, ran the gamut of extremes. During a brief stroll, I saw a hunchback wearing what would have passed in New York for bondage gear; I saw a tall beautiful woman with black hair down to her ass and solid white eyes dressed in a mesh of gold wires set with flickering gems; I saw a Neanderthal type in what might have been a wet suit; I saw a dwarf in red lace trousers; I saw someone in a sleek suit of silvery armor without any openings for eyes or mouth—or maybe it was a robot; I saw several children wrapped in barbed wire, bleeding and ecstatic, lifting their piping voices in mad song; I saw a group of naked dancers, male and female, whirling through the crowd; I saw an old man with a parchment scalp and wearing a soiled loincloth performing fellatio on a streetcorner, while passers-by lined up to wait their turn; I saw two men in gray singlets fighting, beating themselves bloody, while other men, similarly dressed, stood by and whispered among themselves like art critics at an exhibition; I saw a shaven-headed man in a rainbow-colored robe weeping prismatic tears; I saw seven corpses displayed in a shop window, each bearing the marks of violent death; I saw an elderly woman with three arms do wonders with a version of the shell game; and at last I turned to a shadowed window and saw myself reflected—taller, more muscular than my usual reflection, my face fuller and with a more gloating cast, with that focused menace I had perceived in the face of the woman in the Martinique and subsequently in all Skull City's faces. I was clad in baggy gray trousers, a skintight black shirt, a wide leather belt with brass studs and a sheathed knife, like those a pirate might wear. Hanging around my neck was a silver medallion that bore the image of a wolf's head..

I came from each of these experiences feeling stronger, wiser, more self-confident and arrogant, more acutely aware of my position in the world, changes that I hid from Cooge. I disclosed to him everything else, at least everything I learned from the first two experiences. But he was dissatisfied with my reports.

"All you doin' is walkin' 'round, man," he said. "I mean why don'tcha

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talk to somebody? Get fuckin' involved. That's the only way we gonna find out what's goin' on. Okay?"

"No sweat," I said.

"Larson," he said, draping an arm around me, enveloping me in an aura of body odor and Sen Sen. "You gotta work this street for me, man. I need your input. I know there's risks involved, but I promise you—you do right by me, I'll take care of you. I got somethin' goin' I can't talk about yet, but it's gonna pay off big for everybody. Y'hear me?"

Okay, coach, I thought, anything for ol' Cooge High.

He adopted a look of—I assumed—attempted sincerity and looked straight at me. That dead face with its leering fixity was barely six inches away; the whites of his eyes were jaundiced, and his ravaged grayish skin was like a close-up of the lunar surface. His shaggy head seemed to have acquired an evil solidity, as if all the shadows in the room had flowed into it, and I had a jolting impression of the depth of his depravity. Up until then I had been thinking of him as just another warped junkie, but now it was clear that this was one scary fucker, that—though Satan might have nothing to do with his current trip—he had tapped into a source of hellish inspiration.

"You ever have dreams, Larson?" he said, gazing off into the glorious future. "I mean you ever kick back and think how it'd be to have anything you wanted?"

"I guess . . . sure."

"You wouldn't believe what's possible, man, not even if I told you. But you'll come to believe it." He reached out a bony hand, rested it lightly on my shoulder—it did not seem a signal of encouragement or intimacy, but rather that he was trying to transmit some creepy essence. "Treat me fairly, and I'll raise you high, man. Higher than you can imagine."

He had this sick, faraway expression on his face as if recalling some prurient display.

"I'll have another CD ready in a few days," he said. "Should be even better resolution."

Whatever the hell that meant.

On my next tour of Skull City, instead of heading for the towers, I kept to an area where the buildings were relatively small, the tallest being six or seven stories, some constructed of soot-blackened wood, others mosaics of scrap metal, like high-tech hovels in a medieval nightmare; many with ornate brightly painted façades built to resemble gigantic monstrous faces—birds and dragons and cats—like the entrances to carnival fun houses. It was entirely surrounded by the white towers, and standing at its center, looking out in all directions, I had the impression that the district was a slum fenced in by immense bones that had been sharpened into stakes and inscribed with runes. Leaden clouds raced low overhead, mingling with thin smokes, casting a deep gloom, and the streets were very wide, made of packed earth. Bonfires burned on the corners, tended by old veiled women in dark rags (the veils, I learned, were designed to reduce smoke inhalation, and not an expression of

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modesty), who charged a fee for burning refuse or cooking. Few black trucks were evident, but the smell was much worse, the wailing music louder, the crowds thicker, more extreme in their dress and physical diversity, and there was a great deal of sex and violence. People were screwing in alleys, on stairways, anywhere handy. In the space of an hour (subjective time—I had learned in conversation with Cooge that there was no hard and fast correlation between the passage of time in the two places) I saw a strangling, a stabbing, and several bloody fights, a number involving women as the main combatants. Vendors selling food, cigars, cheap jewelry, and packets of powder that I took to be drugs were set up close to the buildings; they were armed with guns and knives, and the muscular guards standing out front of some of the buildings, those that housed bars and clubs, were even more heavily armed, many carrying these strange rifles with flaring barrels and green plastic stocks. The noise and the hustle, the exotic chaos, the rock and roll feverish beat of the place, it all put me in mind of Alphabet City back when I had first arrived in New York, when I was just thirteen, and crime had been even more prevalent than it was these days. This place was rougher, the savagery more up front, yet the atmosphere of paranoid vitality was the same.

I noticed that for some reason people tended to steer a wide berth around me, and that was cool, because I wasn't real anxious to interact with them; but I knew I'd better come back with something for Cooge, and at last I entered a door in a building of pinkish stone, one through which I had observed a relatively unmenacing cross-section of the populace passing, mostly older men. I drew my knife—I was dressed in a similar fashion to my previous adventures, medallion, baggy pants, and so forth—and began easing along a darkened corridor, the street noise receding behind me. Up ahead lay a room lit by a yellow glare. I edged along the wall and peeked in. A skeletal gray-bearded man wearing a holed blanket was kicked back in a wooden chair, his feet propped on a table, and was training a shotgun at my belly. He looked as if he were about to say something, then his eyes locked onto my chest—onto my medallion, I thought—and he lowered the gun.

"First two rooms're free . . . so's the one on the end," he said, gesturing with the gun toward a corridor that angled off behind him. "Take your pick."

I didn't want to show my ignorance, but I was leery of the corridor, which was even more poorly lighted than the one I'd negotiated on entering. I wanted to have some clue of what was waiting for me.

"Which you recommend?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Well, I ain't tried it myself, but I hear number two back there'll give ya a good scrap."

"Thanks," I said, no wiser, but unwilling to press him further. As I crossed the room, the soles of my boots drew scratchy noises from the loose straw matting the floor.

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"Go get it, boy!" the old man said, giving me a wink that crumpled the left side of his face.

The second door had a 2 scratched into the paint. I put my ear to it, and hearing nothing, I eased it open. A sour mustiness seeped forth. There was an oil lamp on a table beside the door, its flame reduced to a brownish yellow flicker by the smeared glass, but bright enough for me to make out a girl lying on a stained mattress in the corner of a tiny windowless cell. She was naked, and her hands were tied together above her head by a plastic cable, one end of which was affixed to an iron ring that protruded from the cracked yellowed plaster. Her hair was filthy, twisted into ropy strands, and her face was streaked with dirt, yet I could tell she had nice cheekbones and hollowed cheeks and a wide mouth like a model on a magazine cover. And big dark eyes. Fantastic eyes. She was a little skinny, but full-breasted. I have to admit that my first impulse was not noble.

"You touch me," the girl said, "and you're gonna need the knife." But as I moved closer, her gaze lowered to my chest and her ballsy act went by the boards. She started thrashing about, yanking at her bonds.

"Chill out . . . I ain't gon' hurtcha," I said.

She paid no attention to this, continuing to throw herself about on the mattress. The iron ring had started to work loose.

"Hey, stop, goddamn it!" I yelled.

When she kept up her struggles, I crossed to the mattress and yanked the ring loose from the wall.

"There," I said. "Now take it easy, will ya?"

She came to her knees, staring first at me, then at the ring, which lay on the floor at the end of the plastic cable. She looked up at me and smiled.

"See?" I said, pleased with myself. "Nobody's gonna get hurt."

She swung the iron ring at me, swung it in a vicious arc at the end of the cable. It whipped past my forehead as I jerked away, reeling against the door, and before I could regain my balance, she threw herself at me, clawing at my eyes, trying to knee me. The bitch was strong, man! It was all I could do to roll her off me, and I suffered facial scratches and a number of bruises in the process; but finally I managed to get her onto her back and lashed the cable to the doorknob, hauling it tight so that her arms were stretched high above her head.

"Shithead!" She spat at me as I came to my feet.

"Nice talk," I said.

She tried to kick me, but I was out of range; she pulled at the cable, rattling the door.

"We can do this one of two ways," I told her. "Either you can answer a coupla questions, and I'll turn you loose. Or—and this way's beginning to really have some appeal—I'll beat the crap outta ya, then I'll fuck your brains out. And *then* you can answer my questions. You choose."

She shook the hair back from her face, peered up at me; some of the fight seemed to have gone out of her.

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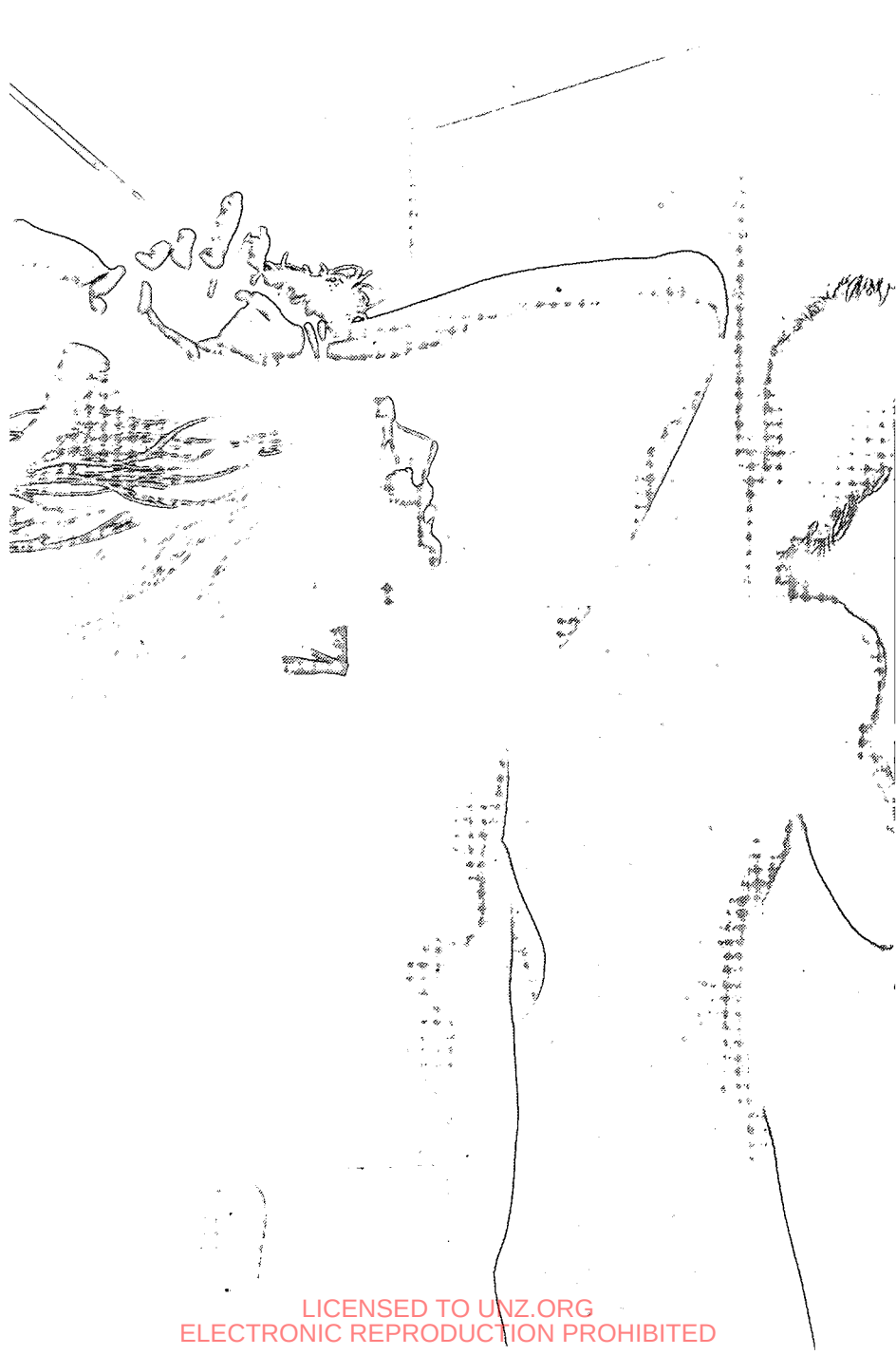

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"I ain't got all fuckin' day," I said. "And you're starting to look pretty damn good."

After a moment she said, "What do you want?"

I squatted beside her. "Both you and the old geeze out there went through some kinda change when you got a peek at my medallion. What's that alla 'bout? And how come everybody on the street's been making a detour around me?"

Her face hardened.

"What's your problem?" I gave her a nudge. "Y'think I'm a nice guy or somethin'? Think I'm gonna just sit here and take shit from ya?"

The thinned set of her mouth relaxed, and she appeared to be checking me out again, as if she had noticed a redeeming quality in my face.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Christ!" I said wearily. "Larson, okay? Name's Larson. Pleased to meetcha. Enchanted. Charmed. Let's have lunch. We'll get in touch with our feelings. Now answer the goddamn question!"

"Why're you wearing that?" She nodded at my chest, at the T-shirt. "Where'd you get it?"

Though I admired her gumption, I was growing more than a little frustrated; but rather than reminding her that I was the one in the driver's seat, I decided to play it her way and see if that would speed things up.

"This guy give it to me," I said, responding with an answer that just popped into my mind. "He told me he'd gimme a job, and this here'd show I worked for him."

"And are you . . . working for him?"

"'Til I get a better offer. Or unless the work ain't to my taste. All I done so far's run a few errands."

"You're new in the city," she said after a pause.

"Yeah, I'm from New York . . . just got in."

"Huh," she said.

"You know New York?"

"No, where is it?"

"Out west. You'd love it. Lots of trees, fresh water, buffalo."

"Buffalo?"

"How 'bout answerin' my questions now? Whaddaya say?"

She struggled into a sitting position, drawing up her knees.

"Untie me," she said.

"No thanks. I'm sorta fond of my nuts."

"I won't try to hurt you."

"Bet your ass you won't!"

"Please! I'll tell you what you want to know if you get me out of here. You know the Spiders?"

I said, "Yeah," not wanting to appear any more ignorant than I did already.

"I run them." She said this with an arrogant flatness that made me think I should be impressed. "You'll be well protected."

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"I don't need no protection."

"Man, I've never seen anyone who needed it as much as you. Walking around wearing the wolf on your chest and don't know what it means! C'mon!" She wiggled her bound hands. "Get me outta here, and I guarantee you'll stay alive."

I wasn't up to beating the information out of her, and I decided that I might as well trust somebody—nothing else was happening.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Saney."

"Saney," I said. "Outstanding. Very unusual. I like it. Okay, Saney, I'll work with ya, but remember this—no matter how big a chump you think I am, I ain't gonna be your chump. Got that?"

She nodded soberly, sincerely, like who me—betray a trust? I didn't buy her act, but I believed she knew I was serious, anyway.

I untied her hands, keeping alert for any sudden moves, then hauled her to her feet. Together we slid along the wall toward the room where the gray-bearded man was sitting. I ambled into the yellow glare, fussing with my zipper, grinning at the old geeze like a high school tomcat, and just as he was opening his mouth, probably to ask how Number 2 had been, I slammed the hilt of my knife into the side of his skull. He toppled sideways onto the floor, and I grabbed up his shotgun. Saney scooted into the room and tugged the man's blanket out from beneath him. She kicked him in the stomach, the face. A twig of blood sprouted from the corner of his mouth. She kicked him again, then wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and led me out into the streets of Skull City.

It took us the entire night to cross the district, which Saney called the Jaddo. We spent most of that time hiding from roving gangs, holed up in alleys or dark cloistered spaces behind buildings. We huddled together and talked, we told jokes. I wouldn't say that we became fast friends, but to my mind, anyway, we were making nice progress along those lines, and I could tell that she wasn't exactly repelled by our physical contact. In the light that penetrated our hiding places I saw that her face was intent upon me, and I knew she was still deciding about me, trying to solve the puzzle I presented both in terms of my ignorance of city life and her attraction for me. Toward morning, she slept, and I kept watch over her, warming her with my body. She was, I thought, one impressive woman. Tough and strong and smart. I could get used to hanging out with her, and I sure could get used to lying around with her. I had a bad case of blue balls from the constant pressure of her body, and I figured that sooner or later, in the spirit of gratitude if nothing else, she would offer me some relief. Finally, as she was stirring, her eyes about to blink open, I couldn't resist kissing her. She tensed, then got behind the kiss; but when I went to groping her wallies, she turned off and said she wasn't in the mood. What did I think she was, anyway?

In the morning she brought me to a big, barnlike loft with a dirty skylight on the seventh floor of an ancient brick building. It struck me

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as familiar, but I couldn't pin down why, unless I was picking up on a general similarity between its air of seedy, overcrowded indolence and that of the shooting galleries and crash pads I had frequented in New York. There must have been thirty people living in the room, and maybe a hundred and fifty altogether in the building. It was sectioned off into cubicles by plyboard walls and hung blankets, and those who were at home when we entered—sallow, tattooed boys and girls, most wearing black leggings, with webs of leather criss-crossing their torsos and rows of squiggly scars on their biceps, like notches—welcomed Saney with enthusiam, but stared at me with unalloyed disaffection. Saney's quarters were in a corner, a room contrived of chicken wire and boards and blankets; the gray light was admitted through chinks and holes in the patchwork roof. Pillows on the floor, piles of dirty clothing and more blankets. She proceeded to put on a leather outfit like those worn by the others. Very fetching, the way the black straps netted her tits. Then she sat herself down on the pillows and filled me in on how things worked in her neighborhood.

Her tone was brusque, perfunctory, and—I thought—not at all in keeping with the tone that had been set for the relationship, considering I'd just saved her butt and taking into account the night we'd spent together. But I supposed that what passed for gratitude in Skull City was merely a sort of truce, an absence of hostility. And that was cool, I thought. I could relate to some studied disinterest; it had always been one of my best qualities. Still, it bothered me that Saney's attitude didn't gibe with the passionate coloration of the city, with its fiercely romantic surface. The thing was, while I knew little about the place, I loved what I did know. The energy, the feeling that this was life with a backbeat, and—though I kept reminding myself that it was merely a "translation"—the comic book atmosphere. I loved how I felt, too. Mean and motivated. Here I was a walking-around, talking-back monster of the real, whereas back in New York, no matter how much of that arrogance and self-confidence I was able to retain, I was essentially a loser junkie with a half-ass plan. Maybe, I thought, all the romanticism was in my head. Maybe a prerequisite to the violence and casual eroticism here was a certain lack of soul, an enabling disengagement. That was certainly true in New York, at least compared to other places in the States, and it might be that Skull City was an even purer distillation of the metropolitan process, of the reduction of men and women into manipulative, conscienceless soldiers of Moloch. Be that as it may, I was powerfully attracted to Saney, and I wanted her to feel something for me. A little warmth and affection, anyway. I was starting to believe, however, that this might not be in the cards.

Saney told me that the wolf medallion was the symbol of a man named Kaj, who had sprung out of nowhere to seize control of the drug and prostitution business in the district. Word had it that he had been an entertainer of some kind, but she'd never met anyone who had caught his act. Nobody knew where he had gotten the juice to organize a criminal

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army, but it was impossible to deny that he had done a hell of a job, and it was thought that he must have connections with some bigwigs living in the towers. Even by the standards of Skull City, Kaj was a monster. His people were reknowned for their brutality, indulging in rape, random murder, mutilation, flayings. Which explained why no one had been eager to get next to me out on the street—the medallion had acted as repellant.

Kaj, I thought, and recalled the facility with which I'd answered her question about where I'd gotten the medallion. "This guy look like he just busted outta his coffin? Got stringy gray hair?"

"Sounds like him. He the one who offered you a job?" She seemed suspicious again.

"Yeah, why?"

"Few people have personal contact with him."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout the man . . . 'cept he said he paid good."

She made a non-committal noise. The conversation flagged, and after a bit I asked her if Kaj had any business rivals.

"Hundreds," she said. "But no one else has his power to organize."

She told me that her people, the Spiders, had once controlled a piece of the drug action, and that they would love to get at Kaj. If they could run him off, she believed the rest of his organization would fall apart and things might return to normal.

"Why not give it a shot?" I asked.

"We already have." Saney lay back on the pillows. "And we lost a lot of our people. Most killed, several captured . . . like me. Kaj lives like a rat. He has dozens of holes, all heavily fortified. It'd take a miracle to trap him."

"So that's why you were tied up, huh? Kaj captured you."

She nodded, regarding me with a speculative look.

"You can stay if you want," she said. "We can use another fighter."

I guessed from her neutral delivery that this was less a personal invitation than a recruiting offer. Be all that you can be . . . in the Spiders. The light dimmed further. I heard a spatter of rain on the skylight.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"You won't last long without friends. We've got weapons, and we've got plans for the future. We're not going to settle for just surviving."

"What about Kaj?"

"Somebody'll kill him eventually. And if not, there's other business we can pursue."

I pretended to be contemplating the prospect. I wished I could pare away the heavy metal decor like cracked varnish from an old painting and see the literal shapes beneath. It was incredibly frustrating to be so in the dark. Like Cooge had said, God only knew what was really going on in Skull City—I could be talking to a giant cockroach, we could be breathing methane, playing cards, talking politics, having a food fight.

Saney turned onto her side, propping herself up on an elbow; her

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breasts bulged palely in their black leather webs. "We can have sex if you stay," she offered.

Hell, I thought, it didn't matter much what was really happening, did it? Not so long as it felt like what you knew.

"You mean now?" I said.

She shrugged. "Now . . . whenever you like. I don't have a lover."

I told her that this seemed weird, a hot little lady like her not having a squeeze, and she responded that her lover had been killed in the attack on Cooge's headquarters. Her lack of tragic concern chilled my ardor somewhat, but I rationalized this by telling myself, Hey, when in Rome, you know, and went for it.

She seemed as hungry for the contact as I was. We spent the next ten minutes or thereabouts engaging in a rough, sweaty foreplay, like two young bears who had just learned about nasty. It was the kind of sex to which I was accustomed—tough and selfish, aimed at taking rather than giving—and I greedied all over her, squeezing on this, chewing on that, rubbing here and there. But just as I was about to go for the gusto, Saney pushed me away and said, "I need to wash up first."

She jumped up, eluded my grab for her, and switched off toward the head, her footsteps reverberating on the wood floor.

Apparently, women weren't any different here in some ways from the ones in New York. I didn't know whether to be pleased by that or disappointed.

I sat up and peeled off a blanket from the chicken wire and stared up at the skylight. Beyond the film of grime and birdshit, the spots of bleared clarity created by the drizzle, I could see several of the white towers; the dirt on the glass diminished my perception of depth and made it impossible to discern the carvings and inscriptions—it was as if I were looking at a flat rudimentary design of white pyramidal spikes on a gray backdrop, like a child's impression of teeth belonging to a big bad wolf or a monster dinosaur. The black airplane things like flies buzzing among them. I was still peering up, wondering what they were doing, spying, patrolling, or what, when the scene faded, and I found myself sitting in a booth at a diner, surrounded by conversation and clatter and bustle. Out the steamed window I could see a light snow whirling down, a punk record shop, a second-hand boutique, a couple of Indian restaurants with brassware in the windows and bright red and yellow signs. I couldn't name the street from that slice of view, but I knew it was the East Village, probably not far from St. Mark's Place. There was a cup of coffee in front of me, a second cup and a half-eaten Danish across the table to prove I'd recently had company. I considered switching the music back on, hoping to get back to rolling and tumbling with Saney, but I wasn't sure I'd wind up in the same situation. Maybe I should beat it, I thought, recalling the Martinique. Though my return to New York had not been traumatic on the last two occasions, on neither occasion had I been involved with anyone—I didn't want to learn that I had committed a felony. But a moment later, Saney's double, dressed in tight jeans and a black

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turtleneck, her long hair done up into a single heavy braid, sashayed out of the john and dropped into the booth opposite me. Clean, her face free of that menacing cast that infected all of Skull City's citizenry, she was drop-dead gorgeous. A healthy young thing who likely knew no more of drugs and violence than what she read in the papers.

"Hi!" she said breathlessly, flashing a smile of such obviously heartfelt affection, it gave me a shiver.

"Yeah, hi," I said, uncertain how I'd earned this response.

She leaned forward, putting both her hands over one of mine. "I wish I didn't have to go, I wish I could just cancel out. It's just I've waited so long for this chance."

"It's okay," I said.

She shot me a worried look. "You think I'm going to walk out and never see you again, isn't that so?"

"Naw, I . . ."

"Don't you know that even if all there was between us was what happened with that horrible old man, I'd still want to see you again . . . just out of gratitude."

"I guess so."

She laughed. "You're acting so depressed! It's like you haven't been paying attention to anything. You do know what I'm feeling, don't you?"

"Uh," I said, "I . . . uh . . ."

She leaned closer yet and smiled again. "I like you, you idiot! I like you a lot. I want to see you again. Is that plain enough?"

I couldn't keep from smiling back at her. "I think I got it now."

"God, I hope so!" She stared at me dubiously. "Look, if you want I'll skip the audition. That's how important this is to me."

"Are you kidding?" I said, beginning to get with the program. "I wouldn't want ya to do that. Go on, get outta here."

"All right. But first . . . here." She dug into a purse that was beside her on the booth, fished out a pen and notepad; she scribbled on a sheet of paper and passed it to me. A name—Ainsley. Beneath it, an address on Clinton Street and a telephone number. "Will you call me tonight?"

"Sure, what time?"

"After nine, okay? I'll make sure to be home by then."

She slid out from the booth, dragging the purse and a car coat after her. She shrugged into the coat, all the while beaming at me. Once she had finished buttoning the coat, she continued to stand there.

"Oh, damn!" she said. "I really don't want to go!"

She wedged into the booth beside me, put an arm about my neck, targeting me with those doe eyes, looking grave. She smelled like soap and flowers. They didn't make faces like those anymore, I thought, faces that had nothing shallow and disdainful in them, faces armed with so much hope and energy.

"You're not gonna disappear on me, are you?" she said. "You will call?"

"You bet," I said, feeling dizzy with her closeness.

"If you don't, I'll track you down, I swear I will."

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She held my eyes a second and then kissed me with her mouth open, her tongue making a delicate quick foray between my lips, her breasts flattening against my arm. I tried to hang onto her, to deepen the kiss, but she pulled away. "I'll see you," she whispered, then stood and walked off rapidly, leaving me giddy, an erection pronging my shorts.

Watching her sprint across the street, arm waving to flag down a cab, I realized that the kiss restored something of our last hours together. Not quite memories, but tangible bits of sweetness and feeling. They both confused and centered me, which was another kind of confusion. I replayed the kiss in my head. How her eyes had looked, the lights in the irises appearing to swarm as she moved close, how her lips had parted to show a sliver of teeth, vaguely predatory. The freshness of her mouth, the firmness of her breasts. It had been a great kiss, a tremendous kiss, Hall of Fame material. I could still taste it, and I thought I could taste as well the quality of those lost hours, and sense their promise. I'd never been as disoriented, as alarmed, as I was then. It was as if one of my fundamental conceptions had been abolished, or rather, as if an important idea to which I had long given lip service had suddenly and to my complete surprise proven to be real and fraught with imminent consequences.

I hurried along the aisle, threw some bills at the cashier and busted out onto the street, welcoming the shock of the cold air. Then I walked with my head down, hands jammed into my pockets, making for Charles Street. I didn't want to think about Saney/Ainsley, about anything, but the thoughts kept coming, and finally I quit trying to walk away from them and stopped in a little basement bar off Sheridan Square called the Lion's Head. Dingy, pleasant joint that had been the hang-out of various authors until this fact became known to the general public. A couple of beers calmed me, so I had a couple more, then a couple more after that. By the time I left the Lion's Head, I was middling drunk and had come to a few important realizations. For one, no matter how hard I had tried, no matter how trivial and brief our history, I could not debunk the idea, the feeling, the knowledge, that Ainsley and I had managed to go quite a ways down a road that I had not really believed existed, one down which I wanted to keep traveling. For another, I understood that I had no right even to fantasize about being in love as long as I remained in my current situation, my current state of semi-addicted flunkiness. And for yet another, I recognized that all my problems and their resolution were bound up in a circumstance about whose nature I had not a fucking clue. If I was to move forward in any direction, I would first have to settle that mess, and the most profitable way of doing that, I believed, would be to try and bring Cooge down in Skull City, hoping that by this action I would also bring him down in New York, thus gaining control of his house, his workshop, and evading culpability. Or I could leave Cooge behind and never return. But then I would be abandoning my best chance of putting myself in a position of strength, and that was one thing for sure that the Apple and Skull City had in common—you had to be

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strong in order to live in a castle and not down on the ground with the rest of the vermin. Ainsley was castle material, an uptown girl; her evil twin might be doing fine in Skull City, but I doubted that Ainsley herself could make it in the lower depths of New York.

The snow had stopped falling, and though it had gotten dark, the air was warmer; it might have been a fine night in early autumn. Lots of people were out, milling along Christopher, and a small crowd had gathered at the Seventh Avenue end of Sheridan Square. Curious, I wandered over and pushed my way to the front. At the center of the crowd, occupying a cleared space of sidewalk under the streetlights, stood an armless man wearing a lacy wedding dress. He was young, in his twenties, with blond hair down to his waist and an unusual equine face that appeared ugly one moment, handsome the next. With pieces of chalk gripped between his toes, he was drawing on the pavement a picture of a palomino horse that greatly resembled him. He said nothing and in no way reacted to the crowd. He was wholly concentrated on his drawing, and this single-mindedness was, I thought, at least as much responsible for the attentiveness of his audience as the eccentricity of the image he presented, lending him a Christlike poise and vulnerability. For some reason I stayed and watched, fascinated . . . maybe because what he was doing seemed emblematic of some mystery, important in some mystic way. But I eventually concluded that there was nothing very interesting about the performance. Like many things in New York, like all those things that imbued the place with its special flavor, it was unique but worthless, and its inconsequentiality was in the end what you took from it. It embodied an illusory richness, and however compelling and artful the surface, it masked a twisted exhibitionist intent. And there was, I realized, a lesson to be learned from that.

Despite Cooge's technological voodoo, this whole thing was, after all, basically an ordinary city trip, a stroll down a dark avenue that suddenly is seen to harbor predators and proves full of corkscrew turns, and I knew I had to approach the problem of Skull City as I would that of a New York street. By cheating, lying, conniving, running, clawing, using any deviant tactic I could in order to create a workable solution. If I were to bring down Cooge in one place and have him fall in another, I would have to start thinking like a real bottom-dwelling New Yorker once again. It would be a grave error to let the exotic surface of Skull City distract me from my strengths—chances were, they would be the strengths necessary to ensure my survival in either place, and I shouldn't waste any more time attempting to figure out the ways in Skull City. But I had two problems that were less easily resolvable. First of all, I wasn't certain that it would be possible to bring down Cooge, and to determine this, I had to stop groping in the dark and discover exactly what he was up to. Secondly, I was having trouble with my motivation. The more time that went by, the more insecure I was becoming with my feelings about Ainsley. Prior to meeting her, I had been looking to take Cooge out for reasons I could understand—greed, a desire for power, like

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that. To have these supplanted by sweeter reasons, ones informed by concern for someone else other than my best pal, Larson—it threw my internal compass out of whack. What the hell was I doing, I asked myself, what sick dream was I entertaining that let me buy into this chump? Love, I thought, don't make me laugh. Sometime during the hours we had spent together, Ainsley and I must have dropped a little Ecstasy. That would explain it. Either that, or the bitch was stone crazy. Just who the fuck did she think I was? Scott Baio, or maybe a young Jack Nicholson? Couldn't she fucking see I was streetmeat and not a leading man? And who the hell was she? All that sweetcheeks buoyancy and brightness. If I'd noticed her under any other circumstance, I would have tagged her for an airhead and checked out her purse. It might be one of those New York deals, I thought. You know, how people get so screwed up from living here they learn to delude themselves with fakes of life, with anything that takes their mind off the environment and gives them the illusion of being safe. Our subconsciouses had probably coerced us into getting tight for reasons of mutual defense. Or it could be I was using the pretence of an emotional connection as a high-minded justification for committing murder. No matter how loathesome a slug Cooge was, that was the appropriate term for what I had in mind: murder.

I caught sight of my reflection in the window of a darkened store—a black figure no more substantial than those shadows found burned into stone after Hiroshima. That was me, all right. A thin dark urgency was all that remained. Loveless; incapable of true solidity. I should back off from this whole thing, I told myself. Cooge, Ainsley, and Skull City. I should beat it back to the better world of full-time medication, hide myself away in the white nights of heroin. There was, I realized, a marvelous consolation in being a victim—you didn't have to think about anything, you just slipped away from considerations of ethics and motive, you avoided the examined life and took refuge beneath the mantle of your suffering. The sight of my reflection continued to captivate me, seeming to communicate these dour insights, and I stared at it until I began to imagine that its spine was curving, its back hunching, little cores of crimson brilliance starting to glow where my eyes should have been. Then, growing frightened of this irredeemable specter of my present, I hurried away.

I reached the corner of Christopher and Hudson at about a quarter past nine, and after thinking things over some more, instead of heading directly home, I went to a pay phone booth and dialed the number Ainsley had given me. It rang seven or eight times, and I was on the verge of hanging up when she answered.

"It's Larson," I said, dismayed by the note of hopefulness I'd detected in her voice—I wasn't easy with the notion that she might be starting to rely on me.

"Oh, wow, I had to run up three flights, I could hear it ringing on the landing. Hang on a minute, okay?"

The shiny black air reeked of gasoline, the stoplight glowed red. A

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herd of cabs pulled up at the corner. Trembling yellow beasts manned by shadows. Couples in the back of two, arms about each other. Everywhere around me were lovers, gay and straight, walking hand in hand, kissing on the streetcorners. It was like I'd been blind to them all these years, and now, suddenly infected with the same disease, I could see them in all their profusion.

"Hi," said Ainsley, returning.

"How'd the audition go?"

"Terrific! They're having three of us back to read again."

"That's great."

She let a couple of beats elapse. "Want to hear something strange?"

"What's that?"

"I miss you. Isn't that strange? I mean, it doesn't seem reasonable to miss somebody you've only known for what . . . four or five hours?"

I had the urge to tell her that we'd spent an intense night on the far side of reality, and this might explain a lot.

"I miss you too," I said. "I guess we're both strange."

Nervous laughter.

"Do you . . ." she broke it off.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said; then: "What're you doing tomorrow?"

Talking to her, I realized, my motivation was firming up nicely. I pictured her by the phone, sitting in the gloom with her legs tucked beneath her, fiddling with a curl of her long oak-colored hair, her face half in eclipse from a shadow and streetlight. I felt excited, the way I might after breaking into somebody's apartment, the room a puzzle of unfamiliar shapes and darkness, nervous, a little afraid, yet stoned on the moment. No turning back. The deed already half done. I had to find out what was next.

"Tomorrow's Wednesday?" I said.

"Yep."

"I'm busy 'til around midnight, but maybe we could go for a drink, a late dinner . . . somethin'."

"I . . . okay." Hesitancy in her voice.

"It doesn't have to be then."

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "That's fine. You can pick me up here . . . if that's all right."

"I'll be there as early as I can."

Through the scratched, smeared plastic of the booth, passers-by had the blurred materiality of people in Diane Arbus photographs. Ancient moth wings stuck to a buzzing overhead light. Graffiti. Anti-Semitic, pro-lesbian, little ink drawing of a man with an enormous whang about to slip it to a big-breasted cartoon mama manacled to a wall. Tanya Sucks Hogs. Cryptic messages of tiny designs—pyramids and boxes and a peculiar script. Cyrillic, maybe. Or Martian.

"God," Ainsley said, "I wish you were here. Talking on the phone

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makes everything seem so unreal. It's almost easier to believe in what's happening without hearing you."

A short bandy-legged man in a wool cap and bomber jacket began pacing back and forth in front of the booth, peering in at me. He had a lined, swarthy face that put me in mind of this Italian hustler I knew worked in SoHo who appealed to guys who liked to get beat up and then balled.

"It'll be real tomorrow," I said.

"I know." She didn't sound confident.

"Hey, maybe it won't be real. But if it's not, we'll both know it. Won't be no foolin' around. Neither one of us would be talkin' to the other if something wasn't happenin', and if it's not there tomorrow, I ain't gonna hang you up."

"I'm sorry." She gave a perplexed laugh. "Hearing you have doubts, it takes my own doubts away. Funny, huh?"

The man outside the booth pressed his face against the plastic, making his features into a scowling mask, as rife with menace as a Skull City face. He stuck out his tongue and licked the plastic, leaving a glutinous, glistening track across the film of grime.

"Hey! Fuck off!" I pounded on the door, driving him back; he flipped me the finger and grinned.

"What's wrong?" Ainsley asked.

"I'm in a pay phone. Some geek outside's givin' me shit."

"I should let you go."

"Yeah . . . Look, it'll be all right. I'll see ya tomorrow."

"Larson?"

"Yeah."

Another significant pause, then she said, "I love you. I know it's true for tonight, anyway. 'Bye."

She hung up before I could respond, and I stood there in that buzzing coffin of light, feeling as dizzy and displaced as I had after she had kissed me, wondering if I should call her back. However, the freak outside began making faces again, and giving up on the idea, I stepped back onto the street. I was furious at this gnarled little creep for interrupting a golden moment. I wanted to punch him bloody. And he knew that, he was waiting for it, his right hand in his trouser pocket. Knife in there? Another night I might not have cared, I might have welcomed the opportunity for a violent exit, but tonight I was full of anticipation, eager to see what the morning would bring.

"Sorry I took so long, man," I said, gesturing at the booth. "Important call. Hope I didn't cause you any inconvenience."

He stared at me, bewildered, the muscles working in that crimped-up monkey face.

"Go right ahead," I told him, making a gracious gesture toward the booth. "It's all yours."

"Fuck you talkin'?" he said.

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"Need some change? You ain't gotta quarter, I be glad to lend you one."

"Hey!" he said. "Hey, don't be talkin' at me like that."

"Well," I said, easing a few steps away, "if I can't be of service, guess I'll be pushing along. It's been special talkin' to you. Maybe we'll meet again sometime."

"Wiseass muthafucka!" He edged forward, wary as a rat. "You watch your mouth!"

I pretended to be checking my watch, continuing my retreat. "I'd like to stay and chat, but I'm already late. Give my best to the missus."

He started after me in earnest then, cursing, moving in choppy little steps, and I took off running.

"Have a nice day!" I called back over my shoulder, and he screeched, "I'll kill you, asshole! C'mere . . . I'll kill you!"

In a matter of seconds I'd lost him in the crowds and neon on Christopher street, but I kept on running, delighting in movement, in the press and gabble and the smells of cold air and pizza and incense, thinking what a curious exchange it had been between myself and the bandy-legged man. It could have happened nowhere else but here, I thought. None of the day's events could have happened anywhere else. And for the moment, still running, still charged from the telephone call, from intimations of the spirit that I might soon come to deny, I believe that I actually loved New York.

In order to break into Cooge's workshop safe, the repository of the notebooks that comprised his records of the experiments, I was forced to seek help. And not very reliable help, since my resources were limited to people I knew on the street. The only safecracker of my acquaintance was a hillbilly junkie named Rebel, and though he was easy to recruit, he wasn't the sort in whom I cared to place my trust. What my old man would have called a real fucking yahoo. A gangly mouth-breather with the ruins of a handsome face and dirty blond bangs and boils on his neck and a penchant for serious fuck-up. I had first met him in a cell in the Brooklyn House of Detention, where I was waiting sentencing on a nothing little bust for which I received six months probation. Rebel was in for B&E and Assault with a Deadly Weapon, the deadly weapon having been a refrigerator. He and a pal had busted into a restaurant in Queens, emptied the safe and the register, and had been about to split when they came across an immense wedding cake in the freezer. In a fit of gleeful criminality, they had sat themselves down, broken open a couple of bottles of bourbon and devoured the cake, laughing and generally having a hell of a time. When they had heard noises at the front door, Rebel had run up the stairs and out onto the second floor landing of the fire escape, where stood an abandoned refrigerator. And when he had spotted the restaurant owner ascending the steps toward him, his genius resolution had been to push the refrigerator down onto the man. Thus my wariness at using him. And yet he was a stand-up guy and, since he possessed the

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remnants of a southern prep school education, no idiot—qualities that can prove to be golden virtues in an accomplice. The only thing that concerned him about the job was his take. I had promised to pay him with the heroin that I'd accumulated during my tapering-off period, and this had stifled any urge he might have had to balk or to question.

Like most junkies who can afford the condition, Cooge was a creature of habit. Since everything was delivered—food, drugs, papers, and so forth—he rarely had to leave the house, but those occasions when he did occurred with the regularity of clockwork. Each Wednesday night he would shower, comb out his hair, dress in an Armani suit, and precisely at a quarter to eight, looking as good as he ever could, he would take a cab uptown to visit one Christine Delauney, an expensive call girl with an apartment in the West Seventies. It apparently took him no more than five hours to satisfy his sensual nature, for he always returned shortly after one A.M.

Those five hours, I decided, were the best time to do the deed, and so, the next day being Wednesday, at eight o'clock sharp I let Rebel in through the basement door and we went up to the workshop. I had to give him a taste of his pay to steady his hands, but once that was done, he managed to open the safe in a matter of minutes.

"Thanks, man," I said. "I'll catch ya later."

I handed him his smack, neatly bundled in hundred-dollar packets, and tried to steer him toward the stairs.

"Be cool," Rebel said, breaking away to inspect a partly disassembled guitar lying on one of the long wooden tables. "We got time to burn." He picked up the guitar neck. "Hey, you think he'd miss this ol' thang?"

"Put it down, man!"

"Okay, okay!" He set down the guitar, began poking at the mechanical debris on the table. "Your employer's a careless fella, Larson. Wastin' lotsa nice junk here."

I was anxious to get at the notebooks, which I had stacked on another of the tables, along with a tin lockbox that had also been in the safe.

"Look around if you want," I told Rebel. "But don't be fuckin' with nothin'. And stay the hell outta the rest of the house."

I watched him puttering about for a moment, then tore into the notebooks, which proved to be a revelation. I discovered that I had not been the first of Cooge's guinea pigs. There had been two others, one whom he referred to as A, another whom he called B. And me. C. That Cooge, I thought, what a fund of imagination. I was not amused, however, to find that he used the word "terminate" in relation to dismissing his previous two flunkies—it seemed too formal a usage for Cooge to have used if he had simply meant "fire." I had the feeling that A and B had gone to their reward.

There were fifteen notebooks, far too many to read in a few hours. I skimmed over the technical passages and concentrated on diary entries that contained speculation and anecdote. In the sixth notebook I came across the following passage:

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"I don't suppose it's important what sort of interpretation one places on the events that occur in Dys—or Bedlam, as A so aptly calls it—since, though the details vary greatly according to the beholder, the fundamental events reflect the same essential process, that of life in a large and violent city, one whose geography is very nearly identical in every instance, no matter who the observer. However, interpretation may someday prove of consequence, and thus I suppose I should put down my conclusions on the subject thus far.

"I am led to assume that all previous notions of hell derive from misconceptions, or rather less sophisticated perceptions of what I experience when I travel to Dys. Who knows how the spells themselves were originally derived. However, perhaps they were originally intended as a kind of language, rather like the development of the Tarot as a means of communicating a basic symbology among ancient academics in Timbuctoo who had no language in common, and as this language was perfected, the spells too were perfected, their specific patterns of sound and symbol evolving into mantra-like formulae that allowed their wielders this curious focus that I have achieved. Be that as it may, it seems apparent that the men who first accessed these spells may have interpreted the subsequent visions in terms of their religion, and may have seen the substance of these visions, the distorted reflection of their own lives, as being redolent of hell. I have noted a number of resonances between Dys and previous depictions of hell, those of Dante and Lucius Appuleius, for instance, and the differences between their visions and mine can, I believe, be explained by variances in our expectations and geographic distinctions between our home cities. I think I can safely say that hell is not—as proposed by religion—the destination of sinners, the karmic resolution of our misdeeds, but is either a medium that contains us all, or a medium that all of us contain. As to the archaic material concerning the summoning of demons and so forth, this obviously relates to the particular geography of one's own circumstance. In both Bedlam and Dys we are dealing essentially with the geography of Greenwich Village and Manhattan. Both scenarios involve enormous buildings bordering and dominating a district of less imposing structures. The towers of Manhattan contain that place's powerbrokers, as do the towers of Dys and Bedlam. However, instead of stockbrokers and investment bankers and ad executives, the towers of both Dys and Bedlam house malevolent groups—families, in the case of Dys—whose vileness rivals that of the Borgias and whose powers have created an environment of infernal chaos. They and their creatures often appear physically monstrous. Thus we have our demons. And among them, my great enemies.

"My initial thought was that Dys, Bedlam, whatever, might be something on the order of an alternate world, one that existed side by side with our own, but while I cannot state with complete authority that this is not the case, further investigations have convinced me that the concept of alternate worlds is too simplistic, too facile, that

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there is both more and less to Dys than meets the eye. I believe that Dys is essentially an illusion imposed by the template of the mind and its experience. But imposed upon what? If one examines the history of magic—black magic in particular—one soon understands that its primary concern is the manipulation of base reality, an alchemy of event that attempts the transformation of leaden possibility into golden actuality. Possibility is here the key word. The consensus wisdom has always been that Possibility is a term referring to the future, or—at the most precise—to the notion that the materials of the future are embryonic in the present. My thesis maintains that Possibility has materiality, that it is—like time and space—a fundamental element of reality, that it is quantifiable and comprises, along with time and space, the confluence of three great streams down which the course of our lives is flowing. I believe that Cabbalistic magic has succeeded in separating out this stream from the others, that it has made it possible to 'enter' Possibility (surely no more troublesome a concept than traveling through time) and effect significant alterations in the constituencies of our fates. But whereas the casting of primitive spells opened a brief doorway out of our reality, allowing a lightning stroke of manipulation, by electronically and digitally rendering these same spells into hardware, I have opened the realm of Possibility (or Chance) to considered and consistent manipulation.

"I am not saying that Possibility is an actual place. I liken what happens when I travel to Dys to what happens during moments of extreme stress, as—for instance—the moments immediately prior to an automobile accident, when time seems to slow down, and it seems that you will have ample opportunity to make the right moves in order to avert disaster. I believe that this is in essence what occurs when listening to the musical analog of a spell—that due to a combination of emotional stress (which the stressful music amplifies and which is the core element of the religious passion once deemed essential to casting a successful spell) and the ancient concentrative symbology, brain chemistry is profoundly affected and one slips from an ordinary perception of time, space, and possibility into the rudimentary perceptual framework of—in my case—Dys. I believe that the mind is so highly charged, elevated to such a height of potency, that it can then directly affect the flow of possibility, and that what appears to happen in the streets and habitations of Dys, is essentially the exploration and fulfillment of a wish. We may in "reality" be sitting in our chairs or walking along Greenwich Ave., but our minds are engaging the raw stuff of physics, toying with the basic patterns of our existence. The process, I am certain, lasts less than a second, though it may seem to last for up to several days (when using the master translation disc). On our "return" we have the sense that much less time has passed in our world, and we discover that strange changes have taken place in our lives—our wishes have come true, we have made them come true. The sense that one has missed out on

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several hours of one's life is due to the stunning effect of the process —many magicians in the Middle Ages have reported falling into a swoon after casting a successful spell; due to the superior technology at our command, we have managed to avoid unconsciousness and for those missing hours (long enough, I believe, for the change we have demanded to take effect) we have been operating on automatic pilot. As stated, the technology permits a more considered means of manipulation than do simple spells. It's as if we're telling ourselves a story, creating a scenario from the immediate materials of our lives that will alter reality so as to grant our heart's desire. (It's amusing to watch A, who—not knowing that he has the power to wish for anything —wishes for things he does not know he wants, satisfying deep-seated needs.) But one must exercise caution in wishing, since the effects created in the real world are often more pronounced than those one recalls having created while submerged in Possibility. After much cautious trial and error—not wanting to inadvertantly create a situation that would be injurious to me in Manhattan—I have secured a foothold in the power structure of Dys, and thus have secured a corresponding position in New York. It has taken me decades of subjective experience in Dys to reach this height, and it will take decades more if I am to rise as high as my heart's desire. Despite my success thus far, I must continue to be cautious. Though Dys is not real, its dangers are very real, for it is apparent that Possibility resists meddling, and unless I exercise caution, I may overplay my hand and may fall prey to its defenses. With this in mind I have created a number of safeguards in Dys that should protect my alter ego against untoward events.

"The relative paucity of detail in the environments of Dys and Bedlam supports my thesis concerning the nature of Possibility. Not even the master translation disc, which offers improved resolution and allows one to retain a sense of one's earthly existence, affords the image of a reality as detailed as the one we know. For example, not once have I noticed a bug, a sore, any imperfection that is other than hugely grotesque. True, some of the habitations are fairly well developed as regards detail—stained walls and so forth—but even they seem poorly fleshed out. As are the relationships one engages in there. They are basic, almost cartoonish in their simplicity. And this (aside from an admitted taste for the fruits of the poppy) is the reason that I have embroiled myself in the world of drugs and feigned a lowlife persona—to find assistants whose capacity for relationships are severely limited, who will have less acuity of perception and thus fail to notice the peculiar inadequacy of their surround. Of course the longer they immerse themselves in Possibility, the more acuity they gain. It seems that prolonged exposure to the unfiltered currents of the medium stimulates one's natural gifts and lets one gain an enabling distance from one's life. Though A has tried to hide his growth from me, I am well aware that he is being less than honest with me

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about his visits to Bedlam, that he has matured both in outlook and capacity. Soon, I fear, it will be necessary to recruit B."

". . . Fruits of the poppy . . ." for Christ's sake!

What an asshole!

A clatter from the far side of the room attracted my attention. Rebel was sitting on one of the tables, a rubber tie loose about his left arm, blood trickling from a fresh track. He grinned goofily, gave a desultory wave and said, "Excellent vintage, man."

I was not in the mood for this and told him so.

"We ain't in no rush. It's only 'bout—" he held his watch up to his eyes "—'bout half past somethin'." He giggled. "Man's still out theah gettin' his charlie doctored."

I was too depressed to yell at him. I sat on a folding chair and stared glumly at the floorboards, troubled by the wan light Cooge's speculations had shed on my relationship with Ainsley, reducing love to the product of a dippy wish and a chance manipulation, and also by the problematic nature of what lay ahead if I were to go forward with my plans. Trashing Cooge would not be as simple as I thought. If I acted immediately, I might be able to catch him by surprise. But what about demons, what about the resistance of Possibility to change? How would I deal with all that?

I reread the passage, then skimmed ahead, trying to make sense of what Cooge was saying. He was right, I thought; interpreting the reality of Skull City was relatively unimportant. His trip about the place being some sort of analog for Possibility, chance, or whatever, it felt right to me; but the thing was, you had to deal with Skull City as if it were as real, you had to play your role and spin out the story of your wish and hope that it accorded with the bounds set by Possibility, with the rules. Rules at whose nature I could only guess. Then there were Cooge's great enemies. From what he said in a passage further along, I understood that he was referring to people who were still trying to manipulate Possibility by using old Satanic rituals. Cooge's hardware gave him an advantage; however, some of those people had apparently been players for a long, long time, and he was more than a little wary about confronting them.

Terrific, I thought; first a junkie who wanted to conquer the world, and now masters of the Black Art.

Once again I was inclined to give up on the whole mess, on Ainsley and Cooge and everything, and with that in mind, I pried open the lockbox, thinking it might contain money with which I could fund an escape. Inside were several CDs, one labeled Master, and some papers, most covered in mathematical notation and thus incomprehensible to me. But there were two folded sheets that proved to be maps, neither bearing any designation or legend. The larger described a district of low buildings circumscribed by towers, and was similar to what I recalled of the layout of Skull City. The smaller was in effect several maps, all

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details of the first, one displaying an underground route leading to one of the towers, and others charting sections of the tower. The most intricate of the detail maps showed a complex of rooms with several narrow corridors angling off from them into the walls, these demarked in a different fashion than was the main corridor, giving the impression that they might be secret passages . . . or maybe stairways. After studying them for a while I realized that if I were to superimpose the larger map over a map of Manhattan, I would find that the tower to which the underground route led would correspond with a building in the West Seventies . . . at least it would be damned close to a perfect match. Could the underground route, I wondered, be the analog of the New York subways? I told Rebel to hang out for a minute and hustled down to my room, where I unearthed an old IRT map from the bureau; then I ran back upstairs to the workshop and made a comparison. They were almost identical. I began to think that Cooge had not been candid about his Wednesday night appointments. Why would he make maps of a call girl's apartment, or rather that of her analog in Dys? And in Bedlam, I realized. And in Skull City. It was quite likely that the apartment in the West Seventies was somehow related to his new position of power.

For a man so given to caution as Cooge claimed to be, he had certainly been incautious in regard to these maps. Of course he hadn't known that I would be capable of breaking into his safe, and success might have made him overconfident. And, too, I had no idea what his safeguards entailed or what defenses Possibility might enlist against me—it could be that further caution was unnecessary on his part. Yet I had no choice other than to try to take him out. Whether or not I fled the house on Charles Street, sooner or later he would send me the way of poor A and B. I had to believe that the maps were righteous and fight him. If in the process of saving my ass I came out a big winner, well, that was just fine; but I was mortally afraid that I would not even be clever enough to survive.

"Jesus," I said, imagining monsters with compound eyes and claws like a giant crab's, and Rebel said, "Huh . . . wha . . .?"

He was sitting on the floor with his legs stuck out straight, like a big skinny baby with a bloody arm. It seemed I was seeing myself, my best possible future if I failed to accept this challenge—life on the nod, on the roach-infested floors of New York, an ambulatory vitamin deficiency with liver problems and an HIV positive looming on the horizon. That was no longer acceptable, it no longer seemed an easy way out.

"Rebel," I said, "You be able to move pretty soon?"

"I can move," he said churlishly. "Just theah ain't no reason for it."

"Y'know, man, I been rethinking our deal."

He made an ineffectual swipe at the fringe of hair hanging into his eyes and gaped at me, his brow knitted.

"You ain't tryin' to back out on me?"

"I ain't backin' out, I just wanna change the arrangement."

"What the hell for? Whatcha gonna do?"

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"You don't really need to know." I glanced about the room. "You see somethin' you want, go 'head and grab it."

"You kiddin'?"

"Naw, go for it."

He struggled up, swayed, said, "Shit!" then lurched over to one of the wooden tables and began pawing at piles of microchips and switches. He picked up something shiny, held it to the light like a jeweler gauging the water of a stone. "Awright!" He glanced about, yanked an empty garbage bag from the litter on the floor, and dropped the shiny something into it. Then he went weaving along the table, plucking up other shiny objects and depositing them in the bag. Soon he started to hum, and shortly thereafter, to sing "Satisfaction" in an off-key tenor. He was in his element, a happy man, and I envied his lack of self-awareness.

I let him shop for a couple of minutes, looking on with a sort of fraternal condescension. Then I went to the copier, erased a section of the tower map, and made a copy of it. Then I gathered the CDs and maps into a packet, and set about collecting scrap paper and rags, crumpling them into wads, soaking the wads in Three-in-One oil, in rubbing alcohol, in whatever accelerator I could find. I tore Cooge's notebooks into strips of paper and soaked them as well. He might have copies of the notebooks, the maps, the CDs, but hopefully not, hopefully—even if he did—I could finish him before he discovered my theft and took action; I figured it would be hard enough just dealing with his "safeguards" and the ordinary dangers of Possibility. I wanted to take him out in Skull City without involving myself or Saney, and I intended to leave no evidence in New York of my association with him. The boys in the band might prove a problem, but I doubted they were such upstanding citizens that they would be eager to run to the cops.

"What the hell you up to?" Rebel asked, the now-bloated garbage bag thrown over his shoulder; then, when I remained silent: "You settin' a fire?"

"Good eye," I said without glancing up.

"Fuck, man! Whyn't you tell me before?"

He darted along the tables, muttering, tossing pieces of equipment aside, grabbing an Ibanez electric guitar, a pocket tape recorder, while I continued to render the workshop into a tinderbox. Finally, realizing that I had no lighter or matches, I told Rebel to wait and went down to the kitchen. I gave the pantry a quick search and found both matches and a half-gallon can of paint thinner, which I thought I would empty over the stairs between the second and third floors. I tucked some old newspapers under my arm and started back upstairs. As I came to the third floor landing, I heard Rebel shout and then a crash. I set down paint thinner and papers, and moving as quietly as possible, I hurried along the corridor toward the workshop. I hear another voice, a grating baritone, say, "Put that shit down!" And on reaching the door of the workshop, I saw a skinny, long-haired man in a leather coat and jeans standing with his back to me, confronting Rebel, who was still holding

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the garbage bag and the Ibanez. I recognized the guy for Skull City's bass player; with his hollowed cheeks and wide slash of a mouth, he looked like Cooge's baby brother. Rebel's gaze shifted toward me; he appeared on the verge of cracking. The man half-turned to me, still keeping an eye on him.

"What's goin' on, fellas?" he asked, appearing unnaturally at ease, considering the situation.

I didn't have a good answer.

"You rippin' Cooge off, ain'tcha?" He grinned at us. "He's gonna really fuckin' hate that, man."

"What the hell you doin' here?" I asked him. "Cooge ain't give you no key. You ain't s'posed to be here neither."

"That's absolutely right. Seems we all in the same boat. Tell ya what." He leaned back against a table. "Maybe we can do a deal."

"Like?" I said.

"I'll take what I'm after, you do the same, and we'll just forget alla 'bout runnin' into each other."

"Sounds good to me," said Rebel, starting for the door

I put up a hand to block his path. "Let's work it out first, man," I said to the bass player. "Just what're you after?"

"I want to pick up some CDs, that's all."

I wondered how much of Cooge's business this dork knew, whether or not he might be intending to make the same moves that I was planning. He had about him an air of smarmy arrogance that caused me to think he knew a lot, that he had big things in mind for his version of Skull City.

"What CDs you talkin' 'bout?" I asked.

"Some of the band's stuff . . . stuff Cooge recorded."

"Why not ask him for 'em?"

"You know Cooge, man. Guy's a freak 'bout lettin' shit go. I just wanna borrow 'em, I gotta show 'em to a producer."

"C'mon, Larson," said Rebel. "Let's do it, let's get outta here."

Paranoia was eroding his self-control. He was shuffling his feet, darting glances toward the door, and I knew that pretty soon he was going to lash out at someone, the most likely someone being the bass player. And I was beginning to think that him lashing out was the best possible resolution.

"'Fraid I gotta problem with that," I said to the bass player.

"What kinda problem?"

"Way I figure, you take his shit, you gonna set us up for it."

"So I set you up for it, so what? You splittin' anyway, ain'tcha? You ain't gonna have to deal with Cooge no more."

The guy was immensely, superbly arrogant, and I dismissed the fleeting notion I'd had of letting him do my dirty work, letting him wage war against Cooge. Even if he were to win, he might decide to wipe me out just for knowing as much as he thought I did.

"That ain't gonna work," I said.

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"It's gonna have to work, damn it! Ain't no other way."

He glowered at me from the pinnacle of his self-esteem, doubtless thinking something on the order of how dare this nit thwart me?

"There's always another way," I said.

"Well, I don't see it!"

"Y'mean, you can't see no other way for this to work out 'cept we take the rap."

Rebel blinked; he stared at the bass player as if seeing him for the first time.

"Jesus Christ, man!" said the bass player. "Ain't gon' be no rap 'long as you get the fuck outta here!"

"You already admitted you was gonna set us up. Sure seems there's gonna be a rap." I shook my head ruefully. "I done time, man. I ain't about to be doin' no more."

At the word "time" Rebel's face tightened.

"Don't gimme . . ." the bass player began, but I cut him off, saying, "You don't have no respect for our intelligence. I mean you stand there grinnin' like a goddamn weasel and tellin' us, 'Hey, everything's cool! You guys run along and once I get through collectin' my goods, I'll drop a dime on ya, okay?' Shit! Way I'm lookin' at it, we gotta have some kinda security here. We gotta have some way of fingerin' you so we can keep you from fingerin' us, and I just don't see how that's gonna happen."

"Hey," said Rebel, shifting his weight from foot to foot, acting like the floorboards were heating up. "Hey, what's goin' on heah, Larson? What the fuck's happenin'?"

"Got any suggestions?" I asked the bass player. "I mean you see any way all of us can walk outta here and nobody gets the shaft? 'Cause I sure as shit don't."

"Awright," he said. "Just take it easy, okay? We can figure somethin' out."

"Better do it fuckin' quick, man. I ain't gonna hang around all fuckin' night and negotiate, hear what I'm sayin'?"

"This is bullshit, man!" said Rebel, shaking the guitar at me like a witch doctor gesturing at a white devil with his staff of office. "I don't need this crap, I just wanna get on outta heah!"

The bass player's air of superiority had evaporated; he was, I believe, beginning to catch on to what was developing. He edged away from Rebel, taking a position where he could watch us both with ease. He scratched at his chin with long nicotine-stained fingers, letting his eyes switch back and forth, seeking weapons, an exit, some avenue of advantage. Greasy strands of hair hung in his eyes, and with his discolored fingers and gaunt, sinister features and eyes gemmed with reflected light, he might have been one of Cooge's demons or a sub-human familiar. It was best that I think of him this way, I realized, given what I had in mind for him. And I saw, too, that I would have to learn to view Rebel's humanity in a diminished light if I wanted to carry out my infant plan without being afflicted by moral spasms.

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I moved closer to the bass player, wanting to engage all his attention, to make him forget about Rebel, who was really starting to lose it, what little color he had draining from his face, nerves twitching in his cheeks.

"Square business, man," I said. "I don't see how we can settle this without somebody goin' down, and that ain't gon' be me. I got enemies in Rikers. There's people there wanna turn my asshole inside out, know what I mean? I gotta habit and no good connections. I be pukin' my guts out for a fuckin' week, and if I get past that, I'll be too damn weak to deal." I could see my words hitting home behind Rebel's eyes, turning him stony with the fear of prison. I injected desperation into my voice, knowing it would infect him. "So c'mon, man! Let's hear it! I ain't got all fuckin' night. I wanna get clear of this goddamn place 'fore Cooge gets home. I wanna find me a hole and crawl in it."

"Awright, awright! Lemme think a minute!"

"Fuck that, man! Ain't nothin' to think about! You gotta give us somethin', man. You gotta give us somethin' on you, somethin' we can hold you accountable for. Somethin'll make me wanna trust you."

He didn't like that, not one little bit, but he had no choice except to go along with me.

"Okay, but I gotta think what, man! I gotta figure somethin' that's gonna make us both feel secure, right?"

"You think I'm a chump? You stallin', man! You just tryin' to come up with some way to fuck us over."

Rebel jittering, clenching the guitar by the neck, building to a peak of spastic fear.

"Look," said the bass player. "Ain't gon' be no problem, you just cool your jets."

"Don't be tellin' me what to do! I ain't your fuckin' boy!"

"I ain't tellin' ya to do nothin', I'm tryin' to . . ."

Rebel swung the Ibanez. The solid body of the guitar connected edge on with the back of the bass player's head, making a soft splintering sound that reminded me of chopping into wet kindling behind my father's barn. It filled my head, that sound. It was solid in my skull, impacted. I couldn't squeeze out a thought around it. The bass player went down like a puppet whose strings had been cut, his legs crumpling, arms flying out, not even giving a cry. I knew he was dead. Blood was pooling wide beneath his head, and the killing edge of the Ibanez was dripping, clotted with flecks of bone and dark blood. I'd been hoping to manuever Rebel into hitting the guy, and that this would bind him to me, make him my accomplice in what was to come; but I hadn't wanted a death. Or maybe I had, maybe I had already acquired the pragmatic outlook of a heavy player in the game of Possibility. I couldn't recall exactly what I had been attempting . . . or else I was blocking it out and manufacturing the revulsion I felt.

"Aw, Jeez!" Rebel dropped the guitar and retreated toward the door. "Is he awright?"

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"Naw, man, he ain't awright," I said with unmanufactured contempt. "You wasted him."

He made a run toward the door, but I caught him and slung him up against the wall. His dilated pupils were tunnels into a reservoir of fear.

"Man, you better keep it together. You better just hang on and work with me. 'Cause we got shit to do, we gonna beat this."

His teeth were bared, his eyes still wide and terrified, but he managed a nod. Seeing the depth of his fright helped to steady me.

"Can you stay cool and work with me? I need ya, man."

He tried to speak, swallowed, and finally said, "What . . . what you want me to do?"

"We're gonna burn this place. Then we gonna hit Cooge."

"What for, man? Theah ain't no . . ."

"Listen up! It's gonna be worth it, I swear. You think this place is a score, wait'll ya see his place in the Seventies."

"The hooker's apartment?"

"Yeah. But we gonna need help. Three, maybe four guys."

"I don't know." He was starting to break down again. His eyes were filling; he put a shaky hand to his brow, a gesture of frailty, of unsoundness. "I don't know if I can deal with this shit, man. I wanna go home."

"Ain't no goin' home from this here, man. Not 'less we fix things up first. And that means takin' care of Cooge."

I don't think he understood me, but I know the word "we" appealed to him—he needed to be part of a "we," of some support system. He had fucked up seriously this time, and though he would have liked to retreat from what had happened, obey his junkie reflex and hide from the dire fact of murder, some part of his mind was still unfogged enough to realize that my help was necessary, that he couldn't survive this disaster without somebody along to break trail.

"So," I said. "We in business here?"

He nodded, glanced down at the body, turned quickly away.

Another nod. He started for the door. Then he stopped and looked back at his stuffed garbage bag. A crafty expression washed the fear from his face. "Whaddaya think, man?" he said. "Be cool if I take my goods?"

My plan to destroy Cooge was not much of a plan, at least not by Cooge's standards. I couldn't afford months of experimentation to determine what would be harmful to me and what would not; I had no clear idea of what dangers awaited me in Skull City or of how to neutralize them, and I had to count on the element of surprise, on the fact that Cooge would not be a player in this particular game. Nor did I understand completely the relationship between one's manipulations in the realm of Possibility and the resultant events in Manhattan, especially in the area of side-effects. I didn't want to harm Ainsley, yet I wasn't sure how to keep her safe, because on returning to Skull City, I would be dealing with the same constructs I had encountered on my previous trips, and I suspected that any manipulation I attempted would probably involve

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Saney and the Spiders—that would be the scenario my subconscious would seek to exploit. If I tried to keep Ainsley out of the picture, I was afraid that Saney might become involved anyway, and, without my protection, suffer some injury that would affect her New York counterpart. The thing to do, I decided, would be to get close to Ainsley before I returned, to make sure that she was with me, and then, maybe, when I got to Skull City, I could manage events so that I kept both Saney and myself out of the really rough stuff. Several passages I'd read in Cooge's notebooks seemed to suggest this was an operable tactic. And I hoped that I could use Rebel and the new recruits—whoever they turned out to be—for cannon fodder, let them take all the risks, and that this would create a circumstance in New York for which I could in no way be implicated. I had few qualms about using Rebel this way, and had our roles been reversed, he would have used me without a second thought. If my plan worked, he might be better off than he could have ever supposed, he might wind up with some money, some power, some kind of future. If it didn't . . . well, like me, he hadn't been expecting a long run on Broadway. There was no moral high ground to be had in the situation, and as far as I can tell, the concept of moral action is generally a shuck, a label some try to stick onto shit they've done that has happened not to fuck over too many people. When citizens act moral, I figure it's usually not because they're adhering to a principle, but because they're scared to take what they want, because they need the cloak of principle in which to shroud their cowardice. Maybe that's harsh, but it speaks to what I've seen of truth, not what I want to be true. The big ones eat the little ones up here. Later they go to church. That's Life in the Big City, that's the Code of the West.

I wasn't eager to put Ainsley and Rebel together, but I couldn't trust Rebel on his own. We cabbed over to Ainsley's apartment on Clinton Street, and arrived just in time for my scheduled late date. Ainsley met me at the door with a kiss, but stared askance at Rebel, who was hanging back in the hallway, looking like your average guilty party, your Criminal-of-the-Month Club Main Selection. Before she could ask who Rebel was, I said, "There's a problem I gotta take care of. No way I can make it tonight."

Her face betrayed disappointment, then tightened into a resentful mask. "I see," she said. "Well, I've got things to do myself."

"Naw, you don't see," I told her. "This is like crucial. I don't take care of it, I might not be . . ." I broke off, realizing that whatever I said might worry her; but I was too late.

"Are you in trouble? What's wrong?"

"Nothin's wrong. It's just I gotta committment. But it ain't gonna be hangin' me up no more after tonight, I promise ya."

She glanced out into the hallway at Rebel.

"He's this guy's helpin' me out," I told her.

"God, you're scaring me, Larson. The things you told me about your life . . . you said you were through with all that."

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She was wearing this black silk blouse and gray slacks that clung to her hips, and her hair was loose about her shoulders, and with those big dark eyes and that strong, sensitive face, she looked about good enough to die for. Or to kill for. I felt like a grungy tide that had washed to her feet.

"Can I come in a minute?" I asked, and after checking out Rebel again, she said, "Sure."

Ballet and theater posters on the wall. Snap-together bookshelves. A few hanging plants. Floor pillows. Some nice pieces of unfinished furniture. An old tabby who didn't even bother to lift his head when we entered. It was pretty much what I had expected. Student decor, young actress digs. It had her bright, clean, energy. I tried to make it clear to Rebel with signs and stern looks that he should wait in the living room and not steal anything.

"What?" he said, brushing his hair back from his eyes. "What?"

"Just stay there . . . and keep your fuckin' hands in your pockets."

He pretended to be puzzled by what I'd said and flashed a smile at Ainsley that seemed aimed to apologize for the curious behavior of his good buddy Larson. Somewhere down beneath the scabs and the scuzz and the street twitches, Rebel still possessed an ante-bellum soul, he still desired to leave a refined impression with the ladies.

I steered Ainsley into an adjoining room, the kitchen, and leaned her up against the refrigerator. The only lights came from the street, slants of blue neon. Her eyes gleamed, and her pale face was brushed with charcoal shadow. I was high on her perfume, and I could feel the lines of tension between us, the pulls and eddies of attraction.

"Don't be worried or nothin'," I said.

She gave a dismayed laugh.

"No, seriously," I said. "It's gonna be fine. We'll get some breakfast in the mornin' . . . you eat breakfast?"

She ignored the question. "What're you going to do?"

"Look, it ain't nothin' noble, I ain't gonna lie. But it ain't no mortal sin, either. It's just somethin' I gotta do so's I can get clear of the shit I been livin' in."

She lowered her eyes.

"I swear," I said, "this is the last time I'll do anything like this."

Another laugh, this with a cynical edge. "Just one last job, and I swear I'll go straight."

"I guess it does sound corny."

"Yeah . . . corny."

"I'm tryin' to make it, Ainsley. For you . . . for me, too. I gotta do this."

"It's dangerous, isn't it . . . what you're going to do?"

"Naw, not really. Won't take too long. I can come back later tonight if ya want . . . if it'll make ya feel easier."

She shook her head. I could see doubt and fear working in her.

"Stop thinkin'," I told her. "Thinkin' don't cure nothin'."

"How'm I supposed to do that?"

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I'd been wanting to kiss her, and this seemed as good a time as any. Compared to our first kiss, this was Krakatoa compared to a blowout on the interstate, a fucking Hiroshima meltdown of a kiss. My hands were on her breasts, her hips, and her hands were doing some very nice stuff to me. I would have liked to stay with it, to take her into the bedroom and find out all those things that were waiting for us. But I was a good soldier. I pushed her away and told her I had to go. She nodded, dropped her eyes. I gave her more meaningless reassurances.

"I'll be here," she said dispiritedly.

Now or never time.

I slipped the CD player from my jacket pocket and clipped on the headphones.

Ainsley looked at me as if I'd just grown orange fur.

"Music?" she said. I heard the beginnings of disgust beneath the incredulity of her tone. "You've got something important to do, so you're going to listen to music?"

"Keeps me from gettin' nervous. Y'know, like the way some people chew gum, I listen to music instead."

She stared at me a moment, a variety of emotions, none of them happy, fighting for control of her features. "Oh, God, Larson. What's going to happen?"

I told her a lie and switched the player on.

It was raining when I returned to Skull City, a steady, drenching downpour that puddled in the rutted streets of the Jaddo and gave the place a more realistic aspect than it had had on my previous trips . . . evidence of Cooge's master translation at work. The translation's other virtues were obvious as well, chief among them the fact that along with my memories of New York, I also recalled a life in Skull City—or else I had created a more complex story to fill in the blanks—most pertinently the past several months during which I had become Saney's consort, earning myself the status of a full-fledged Spider and a costume of black leggings and webbed leathers. I found myself sitting with her on the tarred roof of the Spiders' building, sheltered by a wide canvas tarpaulin that was attached to the chimney, a spot where she liked to relax on rainy days. I was showing her the maps I'd found at Cooge's, one of them the copy I'd made. Overhead, several of the dark winged things were flying, lower than usual, but still anonymous, their purposes hidden—I had a feeling that if I were to search my memory, I would know what they were, but this was not a high priority. Below us in every direction lay a sprawl of rooftops, mostly deserted, some figured by windmills, others by factories where I knew—courtesy of my restored memories—munitions and drugs were made; others supported gardens and others yet, those of the various businesses, displayed heavy fortifications. The rain had driven the crowds indoors, and the overcast had leached the bright colors of the buildings. Despite the ornate façades and the devious maze of alleys and streets, which appeared to have been laid out

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in the pattern of a complex rune, the place looked drab, ordinary. Only the towers—ranged like a barbarous picket about the district, segmenting the sky into a string of gray pennons that hung down between them—had retained their vital simplicity. And that was mere appearance, for if Cooge could be believed, the towers contained a more complex reality than could easily be handled. They seemed incredibly solid behind the slants of rain, like sharp white ideas, like God's teeth.

"Where'd you get these?" Saney asked, giving me a suspicious look, fingering the coarse parchment—so the maps appeared in translated form.

"I stole 'em."

"From the place that burned?"

"Yeah."

"You sure they're accurate?"

"I think so."

"But you're not sure?"

"They're Kaj's maps . . . that's all I'm sure of."

"I don't know," she said after a silence.

"What don'tcha know? Here's our chance to waste the son of a bitch. Let's do it! And soon! Today, or tonight. 'Fore he can get himself together."

"It won't be easy to convince the others."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Saney gave a pained sigh "—because some of them think you're still working for Kaj."

I glanced out across the roof; narrowing my eyes, I transformed its rippled black surface and its depressions filled with water into a terrain of ebony hills and lakes. I had the feeling that, as with the roofscape, I'd been seeing everything in Skull City one way and not realizing that they could be seen another.

"I've proved myself," I said. "I proved myself a hundred times. What the fuck more you want from me?"

"It's not what *I* want, it's . . ."

"Lemme ask you somethin'. Why'd you bring me here? 'Cause I helped ya, or 'cause you thought I was Kaj's agent and you figured you could play me?"

She gave no reply.

"Jesus, you really sold it good, baby. You really did."

"It wasn't an act," she said. "Not all of it."

"I'm sure." I spat into the rain and tried to think how to manipulate the situation. "Look, maybe the maps aren't accurate. And even if they are, maybe somebody'll get killed if we use 'em. But I don't need more'n three, four people, and this here's the best shot you've had at getting to him." I paused for breath. "Don't tell me if somebody else had brought the maps to ya, you'd be reactin' this way?"

"No, I'm not going to tell you that," she said.

I met her eyes without blinking—she believed in the language of eyes.

"Do you trust me now?" I asked her.

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"I don't trust anyone completely."

"That's not what I asked."

"It's the only answer I have." She folded the maps. "I'm familiar with many of the places these show, and I believe they may be accurate. But that doesn't mean they can be trusted."

"You sayin' I'm tryin' to set you up?"

She shrugged.

"I saved your damn life," I reminded her.

"That could have been a set-up too . . . but I'm not necessarily saying you're involved. Kaj may have planted the map to be stolen, or it might contain inaccuracies that'll lead us into a trap."

I slammed my fist down. "Yeah, and maybe we'll get run over by a truck, or maybe the building'll cave in. Shit! Spiders is the perfect fuckin' name for you people. Way you hide in the fuckin' cracks and wait till it's dark to come out!"

She threw a right hand that—as I ducked—glanced off my cheekbone. I grabbed her by the arms, muscled her onto her back, and pinned her down.

"Let me go!" she said.

I stared down into that cunning, beautiful face with its hollowed cheeks and shining black eyes, and had the sense that I was also staring into another face, one with identical features but lacking the hardbitten worldliness of Saney's. I felt violent urges, the will to dominate, to possess, yet I also felt a softer emotion—Cooge's master translation doing its stuff. I thought I could see all that Ainsley was in Saney, and I wondered if those gentle qualities were actually in her, repressed, dismissed as hindrances in this harsh place. She wasn't real of course, I knew that—at least I'd bought into Cooge's version of what was real; but I couldn't help but relate to her as flesh and blood and spirit.

"Let me go," she repeated, heavy caution in her voice.

I leaned close and kissed her, kissed them both, a deep kiss, and after a moment she responded. But when I pulled back, she glared at me and said, "That doesn't mean anything."

"Pity," I said, and rolled off her.

She remained lying flat, watching me out of the corner of her eye.

Finally she said, "You really want to prove yourself?"

"I doubt it's possible."

"It's possible."

"Yeah? What it'll take?"

"A little discomfort . . . unless you're lying."

We locked stares again.

"Whatever," I said. "I'm sick of this half-ass shit."

Her face was unreadable.

"I'll be back in an hour," she said. "I have to talk with the others."

She stood, glanced down at me.

"Y'gotta do what y'gotta do," I said. "I'm still with you."

She seemed to want to speak, but she only nodded. I watched her walk

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away. She had a great ass, even if she didn't love me. But she did love me. She just didn't understand how to express it, how to deal with it, and I could relate to that.

I tried to focus on the matter at hand, but my mind strayed back to Ainsley's apartment. I wondered what was going on with her, what small good thing I was missing out on. The rain kept slanting down, deepening the black puddles, sending up sprays of silvery drops, drumming on the cool tar, blurring away the streets of the Jaddo, and my thoughts began to acquire the same slanting symmetry and repetitive gray beat, like the lifeless rhythm of a drum machine. And in the background it seemed I could hear the driving pulse of a bass line, the electronic eagle screaming of Skull City's lead guitar. I felt apprehensive and a little glum, but mostly I just kicked along, riding out the minutes.

When Saney returned she had this scurvy kid named Rabbit in tow—scrawny geek about six foot three, with limp dirty-blond hair, weak chin, watery blue eyes, and skin as white as tofu. Rebel with tattoos. The tattoos were in such sharp contrast to his complexion, they looked like decals. He was always scratching at the fleabites that poxed his neck and shoulders, and his black leather gear hung loose on his frame, as if he'd been walking along and somebody had dropped a net over him. He stood behind Saney, his arms folded, smirking at me. I blew him a kiss, and he said, "Lessee how much fun you think this is in a coupla minutes, friend."

"I'm always havin' big fun when you around, sweetie," I said.

"Shut up, both of you!" Saney hunkered down and engaged me with a searching look. "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?" I said, continuing to frown at Rabbit.

"Why this right heah," said Rabbit. He produced a narrow wooden box like a pencil box, and snapped it open; inside it was a metal hypodermic. A real pro model, though of unfamiliar design. Like if Flash Gordon had been a junkie, he would have used no other.

"What is it?"

"Truth," said Rabbit.

"You mean a truth drug . . . that it?"

Saney said, "Yes."

"Don't do a thing for your head," said Rabbit, his voice mocking.

"It hurts for a minute," Saney said. "Then it's like you pass out. You won't remember it, but you'll be able to talk. We'll ask you questions, and if you answer right, then . . ."

"Then we'll go after Kaj," I said.

She nodded.

"But answer wrong," said Rabbit, half-singing it, "you won't be wakin' back up again." He bent toward me. "Scared?"

"Is this asshole any good?" I asked Saney. "I mean can he carry his weight in a fight?"

She said that he could.

"I want him with me when we go after Kaj."

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Rabbit's grin showed signs of strain.

"In that unlikely event," he said, "you got it."

What, I wondered, would I say under the drug's influence? Would I start talking about New York things, and if so, would that count as a wrong answer? And what was I doing this minute back in New York? Was I being a major asshole and preparing to shoot up in Ainsley's apartment? I couldn't get a clear sense of what was going on there, no matter how hard I tried to penetrate the veil; I thought things were all right, but I couldn't be sure. In any case, I'd gone too far down this road to turn back. This was apparently one of the pitfalls that Possibility posed for those who attempted to alter it, and I had no choice except to confront it.

"Who's gonna judge what's right and wrong answers?" I asked.

Saney said, "I am."

"Let's do it, then," I said with a firmness that I didn't feel.

Grinning, Rabbit kneeled beside me and grabbed my arm, exposing the vein on the inside of the elbow.

I snatched my arm back. "I'll take care of it!"

"Suit yourself, friend." Rabbit handed me the hypodermic and flashed me a chummy wink. "Still gonna hurt."

I pumped my fist, making the vein big.

"Know why I'm goin' through with this," I said, holding Saney's eyes. "I figure you'll gimme a break. Like if I start talkin' crazy, you'll hear me out and give it some honest consideration."

Her voice was small and tight. "I'll be fair."

Just before the needle bit into my arm, it occurred to me that this was how I had been expecting to die, with a needle in my arm, and I had a moment of panic, realizing that it might very well be happening back at Ainsley's, that in a second I might be turning blue on her bathroom floor. I'd always felt an OD would be the way to go, a quick confusion of pleasure and pain, but now the idea rattled me so much, I missed the vein.

Rabbit chuckled, and that steadied me.

As I pushed down the plunger I felt a burning sensation that washed away the prick of the needle. I knew I was in for a rough ride. The next second the burning spread all through my body, and I went forward onto my face, the needle still stuck in my arm. Something inside me was letting go, and I realized that this something was my soul, my will, surrendering to the pain, floating up from an ocean of pain. Dazzling lights whirled in blackness, or else I was the lights, and everything else was whirling. It was all out of control, my life, the drug, it was all being spun in a centrifuge and when the spin finally slowed, something would be flung out, either me or the poison I'd taken. I wanted to fight, but there was nothing I could do to influence the matter. The spin was dizzying me, throwing me around faster and faster, and I was starting to lose it, the lights winking out one by one, the blackness wrapping its

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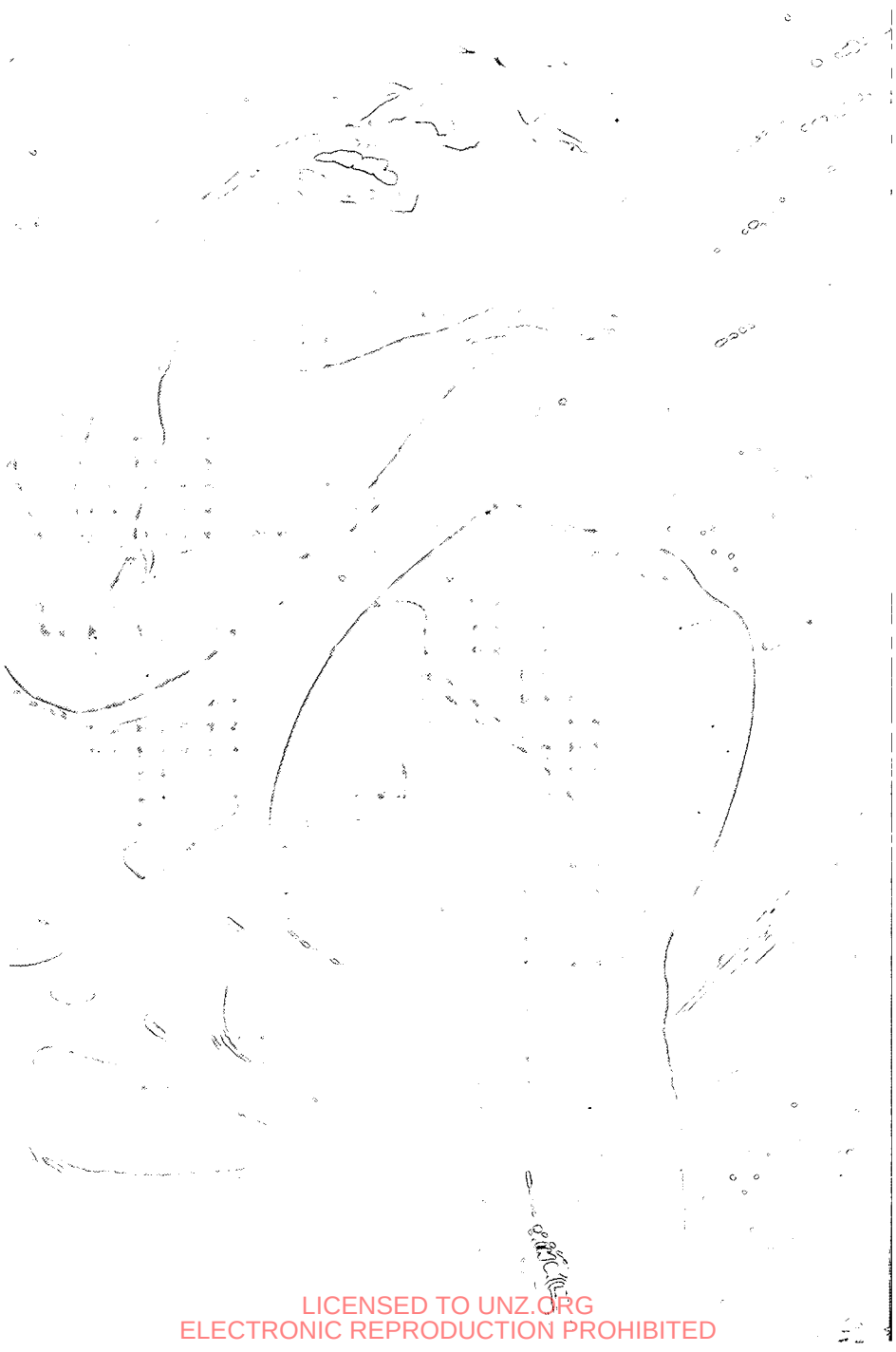

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hot folds about me. Then I lost it completely and went swirling down toward that bottom place where light and dark have no meaning.

I must have told the truth, or truth enough to satisfy the gods of Possibility, because on waking I found Saney leaning over me, concern on her face. Rabbit was squatting beside her, looking sorely aggrieved. It was raining harder than ever, and the drumming noise made me feel dazed and disinterested in life. Then Saney gave me a nudge.

"Who's Ainsley?" she demanded, frowning.

"Huh?"

"Ainsley . . . you kept talking about this bitch named Ainsley."

Jealousy was writ large in the stiff set of her features. Beautiful, I thought; if this whole thing was just a story I was telling, here I was trying to mess myself up. That wasn't anything new, I'd been doing the same thing for a while, but it spoke to the depth of my self-destructiveness.

"This old girlfriend." I sat up. Christ, I felt like shit. My legs were shaking, my head throbbed, my guts were full of poison.

"Where is she?" Saney asked.

"Huh?"

"This Ainsley . . . where's she live?"

"She's old news. Forget it, willya?" My stomach cramped, and I bent double to muffle the pain. "Jesus!"

After a couple of seconds the cramp passed. I got to my feet, still a little shaky, bracing myself on one of the posts that surported the tarpaulin. I gazed out at the towers and felt a surge of resolve.

"Let's do it," I said.

Saney moved up beside me. "You should rest."

"Fuck it! We already wasted enough time. Get me three more people." I turned a cold eye on her. "People I can trust."

She didn't flinch at that, just nodded.

"And guns. We'll need guns."

"No problem."

The more I thought about her lack of trust in me, the cooler my feelings grew toward her. And I wondered if Saney's inconstancy was part of Ainsley's character. Maybe under the influence of the Devil's music I had made a serious error in judgment.

Saney stood beside me for a few seconds longer, then headed for the roof door. Rabbit started after her.

"Rabbit!" I called.

He turned, giving back a stare intended to destroy me.

I returned the stare, and then, injecting all the threatening promise I could muster into the words, totally inhabiting my Skull City persona, I said, "Hey, how 'bout that shit, friend? Looks like we gonna be saddle pards after all."

The three Spiders chosen for our foray into the towers, cannon fodder in the truest sense of the word, were all addicts I'd known in Manhattan.

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There was Carmen, this little scarfaced guido with a fidgety manner and a psychotic temper and the smooth musculature of a welterweight contender. There was Lady, six feet of redheaded sweet white chick on the outside, but with a freebasing habit that had turned her into a hooker and a part-time burglar. And then there was Champagne, a wired, lanky black guy with scarecrow hair sticking out from under his beret, who —going by the talk on the street—would kill anybody you wanted for fifty bucks and change. They had other names in Skull City, but that was who they were to me, that was how I thought of them during our brief and violent association. They were bad dogs, all of them, and if they died here and now, it wouldn't be much of a loss to society and would probably shorten their lives by only months or a couple of years. I had made the same rationalization concerning them that I had with Rebel, and I wasn't going to let it bother me . . . not then. This was kill or be killed, and I had to use whatever tools came to hand. And anyway, we were heavily armed and dangerous, even money, I figured, to come out of the deal with our butts intact. I was packing what looked to be a close cousin to a Smith and Wesson .45 ACS with a silencer and a semi-automatic over-and-under shotgun with a pistol grip. Champagne, in addition to a handgun, was carrying one of those rifles with the flared barrels favored by guards in the Jaddo district, and Rabbit was toting an oddly designed SMG; half a dozen extra clips were hooked onto his belt. Had I seen the six of us heading toward me, dressed in our spidery leathers, I would have tried to turn into a lamp post.

Our trip through the sewer system—the Skull City analog of New York subways (most fitting, I thought)—was uneventful, unless you count rats and slopping sounds and stinking air and the glare of our flashlights off slimed walls as being eventful. We walked like soldiers on patrol, strung out in a long line so that a single burst of fire wouldn't be able to cut down all of us, negotiating narrow walkways, sometimes splashing through black water. We went as quietly as possible, communicating with whispers and hand signals. After about forty-five minutes we passed out of the Jaddo district and into sewers that ran beneath the towers. The shit smelled no better, and the ambience was no less foul, but I sensed a difference, some new vibration in the air. I signaled a halt, and standing in knee-deep water, looking—with our underlit faces—like ghouls just risen from a swamp, we checked out the maps again and reaffirmed our plans for the assault.

There were three passages leading into the tower where Cooge kept his apartment. The first was designated as a main entrance; the second—an abandoned stairwell that had been built for the use of those who had constructed the tower—ran just inside an outer wall, which was ten to fifteen feet thick, and the third paralleled a centrally located elevator shaft. My plan entailed the splitting of our little force into two groups, each of which would approach Cooge's apartment along the two stairways. One had an adit that entered what appeared to be a service corridor adjoining Cooge's place, and Rabbit, with his SMG, was to station himself

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in a closet and watch the front door, while Saney and I remained on the stairs, waiting outside a hidden door to the apartment, hoping that the second group—Lady, Carmen, Champagne—would surprise Cooge by coming in through another hidden door and take him; if not, I hoped they could either flush him out the front door toward Rabbit, or toward me and Saney, and we would finish him. I did not tell the others about the section of the map that I had erased back at Charles Street—it had showed yet another adit leading to a room within the walls, and thereafter to a passageway leading higher into the tower. I intended, after Rabbit had taken his post, to pretend to stumble upon this room and to have Saney keep watch there. If things went badly, she would be out of immediate danger, and with Rabbit and the others to divert Cooge's defenses, we might be able to escape into the upper reaches of the tower.

It was the best I'd been able to come up with as far as keeping Saney safe, and I thought that it would be enough.

Cooge's apartment was on the tenth floor, and the two stairways angled up from the sewer system at points separated by about a hundred and fifty feet. Rabbit, Saney, and I started up the stair that ran inside the walls, leaving the central stair to Champagne, Carmen, and Lady. When we parted company, though I kept my game face on, I didn't expect to see them again; they were the shock troops, our first wave, and if things were as bad in the towers as Cooge had intimated, they were likely going to wind up as casualties. It was a relief to be away from the stink of the sewers, but the stairs themselves were no tremendous improvement as regards atmosphere. Pitch-dark, hot, musty, cobwebs hanging in filmy veils, with rats and God knows what else scuttling about on the crumbling concrete. Our flashlights exhumed bristling, lumpy shapes from the darkness, creatures the size of badgers with gleaming red pinpricks for eyes—they retreated before we could identify them. On several occasions I heard a slithering overhead, as of something moving along the underside of the next level of steps, yet I was never able to bring the source of the noise to light. I had the sense that a powerful pulse was throbbing just the other side of the concrete wall, as if the tower were a living organism and we were ascending the outer wall of the chamber containing the heart. Though this perception was for the most part the product of apprehension, I didn't doubt that it was keyed by something real, some telltale of power too subtle for my mind to catalogue. We were crossing the border into truly alien territory, like mice scurrying behind the boards in God's pantry—I had no idea what sort of mousetraps might be set. The higher we climbed, the less confidence I was able to sustain concerning my plan and the more I hoped for some vast upheaval of luck, a great wind of it, to sweep down out of nowhere and abolish the laws of chance. The one thing that gave me heart was knowing that Cooge must have made a similar climb in Dys. True, he had been prepared to make it—better prepared than I was, at any rate—but he too had been imperfect and full of fear.

Frankly, I was somewhat surprised when we reached the tenth floor

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without meeting any opposition. Maybe Cooge's estimation of the dangers involved had been overstated, or maybe reality was harsher in Dys than in Skull City. The door leading to the service corridor was jammed, and that caused us something of a problem—getting it open without making too much noise—but we managed it, and once Rebel had entered the corridor, which seemed in all respects normal, well-lit and richly carpeted . . . once he had taken his position inside the closet, the door left an inch or two open so that he could scope out the main corridor, I made a big show out of discovering a crack in the stairway wall that signaled the presence of the secret room.

"What is it?" Saney whispered after I'd pried it halfway open.

"There's a room here . . . another stairway."

I shined my flashlight onto a narrow opening—you could see the first eight or nine steps leading up from the back of the room, which was tiny, hardly any bigger than a closet. Bare concrete and some crumpled rags.

"Keep an eye on things in there." I pushed her inside.

"Why? There's . . ."

"It might access Kaj's place. C'mon . . . I'll be just up ahead."

Reluctantly, she went into the room and stationed herself beside the stairs.

"When the shooting starts," I told her, "stay right here. Kaj might be coming quick. Even if he doesn't, if things get fucked up we might need to use those stairs. Keep 'em clear. It's important, okay?"

She didn't like it, but she nodded.

Then I went up the next stairwell, to a position just above where the hidden door was marked on Cooge's map, and waited in the dark.

I checked my watch. There were six minutes left before Champagne, Carmen, and Lady were due to break in through the other hidden door and begin the assault, and I spent those minutes regretting everything, wishing for a thousand changes in the past and the present, praying—to whom, I had no clue. Just praying, just sending heartfelt prayers off into nowhere, while the darkness fitted me with a black quilt of paranoia. I made promises to God, you know, the kind you make in precinct houses when the cops say they're going to give you a fix to keep you quiet until your arraignment and you know it might be a hot shot, because their attitude toward you is like an exterminator's toward a roach, because you're just a paperwork problem to them as long as you're alive; the kind you make in Rikers when somebody in a cell down from you starts to scream, and the black guy up a tier is singing a little song about how he's going to fuck you and kill you, and it's nine o'clock, lights out, way too early for a man to sleep, everybody's mumbling, tossing and turning in their bunks, thinking heat and dreaming women, the crazies are talkin' to their shanks, and the beast is prowling all along the cellblock, and the word is out that rivers of blood and redemption are one, and the guard with the heroin habit and the smile like a ridged-up scar has taken a note of your name, and you're not real sure you want to see the morning; the kind you make when your father comes to stand in your door at

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midnight, silhouetted against the hallway glare, enormous, a black giant swaying drunkenly, bigger than God, so big he's got his own gravity, and he's pulling everything toward him, furniture, light, hope, all of it being absorbed into his blackness, and he's muttering caveman talk, he's cursing, and then he gets to saying your name over and over like it's some evil Martian sound that's gotten inside his head and driven him crazy, and he can't do anything except keep on saying it until he roots the fever out at the source, and you realize what's in his hand isn't the usual vodka bottle, it's a knife. Just get me out of this, God, you pray, just get me out of this fucking place this one time, please, and I swear I'll never do wrong, I'll bow down and worship, I'll bring presents to old ladies and beggars, I'll work for the Kingdom, and I won't ever tell no more lies. The loneliness of the stairwell brought this terror and desperation home to me, drained me of all arrogance, and I was still hanging my head and gripping my weapons hard, still making promises, when I heard gunfire though the secret door, the heavy beat of Champagne's rifle, *choonk, choonk, choonk*, and then a faint agonized scream.

I jumped up, aimed the shotgun at the door below me, waiting for it to spring open and Cooge to scuttle out. Nothing. Seconds, then minutes went by, slow as dripping syrup. Saney called to me, asking what was going on. I told her to stay put. It had gone wrong, I knew it, but it was too late to pull back now. I had to go into the apartment. There weren't going to be any slow Sundays with Ainsley back in New York, no sweet ride, not unless I went on in and dealt with Cooge. I'd made a serious mistake in gauging the difficulties involved, and it wasn't a question of staying clear anymore, of avoiding implication; it was a matter of survival.

It took me half a minute or so to crack the door. A beam of light shot forth. Bright as hell. It was only a room, albeit a big one, encompassing about an acre, I'd guess. L-shaped—I was at the end of the bottom stroke of the L, just able to see the begining of the long stroke. But it seemed I was gazing into the depths of a strange furnished jungle with gold metallic foliage and thickets of slim ivory trunks like stands of white bamboo or sprays of birch glimpsed at a distance, and veins of blackness wending across the ceiling, like forking branches in the massy gold crown of a great tree, except they were too smooth to be real, and a couple of pieces of glistening red fruit half-hidden in among the leaves, and ridges rising from the carpet of golden moss that were shaped into sofas and chairs. Boulders of shimmering pearl breaking from the carpet, winking green lights tucked into cracks, set at the centers of leaves, peeping up from the moss, scattered everywhere. Sensors, I figured. Checking me out. Or maybe they were just ornaments. The walls were mostly obscured behind ferns and bushes and flowers, all in shades of gold and white and viridian. And there was a gap in the foliage about fifty feet along the bottom stroke of the L shaped roughly like a door; through it I could see what looked to be an ordinary room. A chair, the edge of a table, fluorescent light.

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No sign of Cooge.

The only sign of Lady, Carmen, or Champagne were some smoking holes blown through the pretty golden leaves, cratering the concrete behind them. The three of them had entered at the top of the L and judging by the location of the holes, I figured they must have run into something before they had come in sight of my position.

I eased into the room, I didn't want to, but I did it just the same, and went forward, going in a crouch behind the bushes, my guns ready, watching for something to leap up from behind a bush or a boulder, all my nerve ends exposed. When Rebel came sneaking up behind me, I almost shot him. He was paler than usual, his pupils were huge, and he was breathing shallowly. The boy was freaked.

"Whatcha doin'?" I whispered.

"Man," he said. "That hallway . . . I couldn't stay there, man."

"Why not?"

He just shook his head, peering wide-eyed at the artificial jungle. "Don't worry 'bout Kaj gettin' out that way, man. Don't you be worried 'bout that."

He was too frightened to be lying.

"Awright." I gestured with the shotgun. "Let's go."

He didn't argue. I believe that—like me—he understood there was no running away from this, that there would have to be resolution in some form, and though a favorable resolution was unlikely, we had no choice but to go forward.

We moved deeper into the room, edging toward the door, twitching our heads this way and that, alert for any sound or movement, but there was neither sound nor movement in that jungle. We had gone about twenty feet when Rebel stopped and stood gawking up at the leaves. At one of the pieces of red fruit, fully revealed from that angle. It wasn't fruit, I realized, it was a part of a body tucked into a notch between branches, so mutilated that I couldn't guess whose it had been, or even what part of them it was—maybe a chunk of thigh. A glistening mess of bloody sinew. And there was, I realized, at least one other such artifact set somewhere among the golden leaves, though I couldn't spot it from where I stood. A red droplet bulged from the thing and fell to spatter at our feet. I wondered if any of my shock troops had survived.

It was hard to get my legs working again, but nonetheless I started toward the doorway, moving behind bushes set close to the walls. As we neared the door I heard a voice. Male; unfamiliar. Someone responded in a baritone, somebody else laughed. I snatched a peek inside the room. It was a kitchen with an imposing-looking metal door set in the far wall. A blond man with a Palm Springs tan and acne scars pitting his cheeks was sitting at a table. This little greaser in a striped jacket, his thirty-weight hair tied back in a ponytail, was leaning against the refrigerator, eating a sandwich, and another blond, this one a long-haired, heavyset guy in a loose cotton shirt and leather trousers, was messing at the counter, chopping lettuce. Thor the saladmaster. A pistol lay close by his

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hand. I made a silent speech to Rebel, telling him to back me up. Then, keeping low, I scooted into the room.

The heavyset man grabbed for the pistol. I shot him once in the chest and once in the side. The silenced .45 made a *whump, whump.* The bullets put a big hitch in his step, lifted him and sent him in an ungainly pirouette back against the counter, then down. Behind me there was the popping of Rebel's SMG. The greaseball spat out his mouthful of sandwich as a round caught him in the neck. He went over onto his back, clutching his throat and flopping about. The blond acne-scarred man never moved a muscle. His hands remained flat on the table. His eyes did a quick trip back and forth between me and Rebel. I hurried over and rammed the barrel of the .45 up under his jaw.

"What happened back there?" I nodded toward the room with the golden jungle.

"Close the damn door," he said, rolling his eyes in panic. "It don't like gunfire, man. It's sleepy 'cause it ate, but the gunfire . . . It'll come in here after you."

"Fuck you talkin' about?"

"Close it! No shit, man! You don't close it, we're dead!"

Rebel closed the door, and the blond man's eyelids drooped, he let out a breath and relaxed. I didn't want him to get too happy. I jammed the .45 hard against his Adam's apple.

"What the hell's out there?"

"Kaj . . . it's one of his children."

"Don't gimme no shit!"

"I swear to God . . . y'know what I mean. His familiars, y'know."

I let the matter drop. "Where's Kaj?"

His eyes wanted to tell a lie.

I smashed his front teeth with the butt of the .45. Blood from his mouth spattered across the back of my hand, and he toppled off his chair, going down to all fours. I repeated my question.

"He'sh . . ." the blond man gagged, spat out bloody fragments. "Hish offish."

I wished I'd held off with the teeth—translation was proving to be a problem. "Office?" I said. "He's in his office?"

A nod.

"Through there?" I gestured at the metal door.

"Mmm."

Blood dribbled from the blond man's mouth. He sat back with one leg stuck out, one tucked beneath him; his tan had lost its healthy depth.

"Who's with him?" I asked.

"Dunno."

I started to swing the .45 again. He cringed, saying, "Shwear to Gah, I dunno! Shree. Maybe shree, maybe mo'."

Shree . . . terrific!

I hauled him to his feet and put the barrel of the gun behind his ear.

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"We're gonna pay a visit to ol' Kaj," I said. "Anything I should know about what there is on the other side of that door?"

He said something I couldn't understand. After a second try I realized he was telling me that an alcove lay between the kitchen and Kaj's office. Somebody was probably—"prolly"—on guard there.

I cautioned him not to try anything. He nodded, his eyes widened in an attempt to communicate his sincerity—he was with us one hundred and fifty percent, you betcha.

Rebel opened the metal door, and I shoved the blond man through into a little green room furnished with a wastebasket and a couple of metal chairs. There was a door in the wall opposite.

"What the fuck happened to you?" somebody asked him.

I leaned around the corner and shot the somebody—a pudgy guy in a white robe—in the head. Then, using the blond man as a shield, with Rebel right on my heels, I burst into Cooge's office, a room slightly less long than the lobby of Grand Central, set about with groupings of sofas and easy chairs, and a long banquet table on the left-hand side.

There was one other person in the office with Cooge, not shree. Cooge was sitting behind a teakwood desk big enough to be a coffin for a gorilla. He was dressed in Star Trek villain bondage gear, this warrior deal with lots of chrome trim and leather straps; with his gray witch's hair and gaunt face, I thought he looked more Romulan than Klingon. Off to the side, guarding a closed door, stood my candidate for Thug of the Year. Black guy in a muscle T-shirt and slacks. Neat mustache. No scars, no chains, no sartorial emblems of African heritage. If he had been normal-sized, he could have passed for a junior executive; but he was close to seven feet tall and nearly half that wide. Behind them on the wall were ranks of trophy plaques, each sporting some portion of a body, mostly hands and ears, a few female breasts. Seated at the banquet table, which was set with silverware and napkins and laden with turkey, prime rib, and so forth, were eight miracles of taxidermy. Five men, three women. They were heavily made up, dressed in satin finery, emerald and ruby necklaces for the ladies, rings for the gents, and they were posed in conversational attitudes, as if they'd been struck waxen and dumb in the midst of happy talk. Very lifelike. The only giveaway, apart from their unnatural stillness and pallor, were the wounds that showed on a couple of them—slashes too deep and wide for the make-up to adequately cover.

Had things been going more-or-less as planned, I would have wasted Cooge immediately, but as things stood I thought we might need him as a hostage in order to escape. I told him to come out from behind the desk.

"Foolish boy," he said, and grinned.

Beside him, Mandingo let out a laugh that sounded like a lion coughing on the veldt.

I clipped the blond man on the back of the head with the .45, laying him out, and then, as a warning, I fired the shotgun at a point well above Cooge's head. The pellets made a nice tight grouping in the nearly invisible sheet of bulletproof glass that separated us from the desk.

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"Oops," said Cooge gaily.

Something cold and hard was jammed into the base of my neck. I nearly pissed myself.

"Drop the weapons," somebody said.

I did as instructed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rebel do the same; he was being covered by another man.

Cooge punched a button on his desk; the sheet of glass was retracted into the ceiling.

"Hurt the short one," he said to Mandingo.

I'd never considered myself to be particularly short, but since Rebel was several inches taller, I had no doubt to whom Cooge was referring. I made to run, but the guy who had been holding the gun on me took the wind out of my sails with a kidney punch, and by the time the explosive pain of the blow had begun to recede, Mandingo had grabbed me under the arms and lifted me off the floor. He beamed—like now we gon' have some fun, little dude. I headbutted him, but all I succeeded in doing was giving myself a headache. He walked me backward a few paces and then heaved me onto the banquet table. I landed on my back, shattering dishes and scattering the silverware. Dimly I heard Cooge cautioning Mandingo not to damage his trophies. I glanced up into the sunken, pallid face of a woman in a dove gray gown. One of her glassy eyes was angled sideways at the corpse with whom she was ostensibly holding converse, and the other, which had slipped in its socket, was angled madly down toward me. Above my face, her twig hand clutched a fork, as if she were thinking of having a bite of life.

Before I could react, Mandingo picked me up by the neck. For a time he amused himself by holding me several inches off the ground and choking me. I pried at his fingers and tried to kick him. He continued to smile. His white teeth blurred. Dark fuzzy shit began growing inward from the edges of my visual field. Cooge was laughing—seemed like my death was proving to be a real fucking knee-slapper. I was on the verge of blacking out, when Mandingo threw a couple of shots to my belly and side, and gave me another long distance toss. One of my ribs was cracked, I was pretty sure. I could hardly breathe, and when I shook my head, trying to clear it, a razor sliced into my flesh from the inside. I was lying flat on my stomach, peering along the nap of the carpet, like a golfer determined to read a tricky green. Two black shiny blobs hove into view. Shoes? Yep, no doubt about it. They were shoes. Despite being afraid, I was groggy enough to be mildly pleased by my skill at identification. Can't fool ol' Larson. He'll spot a pair of shoes anytime, no matter how dizzy he gets. The next second, a big hand reached down and up I went again.

I passed out for a while, and that must have spoiled the fun, because when I regained consciousness I was sitting in a chair at the banquet table. I had the end seat next to a rotten old fat gent in a frock coat and mildewed ascot, who was gazing with fiendish delight—his lips stretched in a rictus grin—at a chunk of rare beef. Mandingo was standing with

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his arms folded behind Cooge, who was leaning across the table toward me. Rebel was being held prisoner by the goons who had come up behind us. An unsightly pair. Except for their silver wolf medallions and Cooge-like leather and silver gear, they could have been cheap Mafia muscle.

"Ah!" Cooge said. "Good!"

I straightened in my chair and regretted it instantly. One of my ribs was definitely broken.

"Dumbass!" said Cooge. "What you thinkin' 'bout . . . tryin' to take me over?"

I was hurting too much to think of a good comeback. It was hard to think, period. I had a sense of dislocation. This was all just too weird, this whole marooney about the realm of Possibility. Cooge, for instance. He didn't know a thing about the fire on Charles Street, he wasn't even directly involved in the events of the evening. Yet here he was, ugly as a wart, his bad breath gassing me. I understood it, but it still didn't scan. Maybe this was simply a bad listening experience.

"What'sa matter, fuckhead?" Cooge said. "You run outta bullshit?"

Mandingo chuckled, as did the goons. Rebel closed his eyes.

My own eyes, I thought, must be playing tricks on me—I could have sworn I saw movement behind the desk. Then I saw that the door had been eased open a couple of inches.

There was a little whiff, like when a vacuum packed can is punctured. One of the goons looked down with amazement at a red stain on his belly. Another whiff. His right leg did a funny little kick, as if he were trying to shake off a bug, and he went face down onto the carpet. A fraction of a second later, Goon Number Two grew a red beauty mark on his cheek and went over onto his side. Cooge jumped behind me, grabbed me by the hair, and forced my head back. Something sharp pricked my throat.

"I'll cut him!" he said. "Fuck with me, and I'll cut him!"

Because of the angle at which my head was tipped, I couldn't see whom he was talking to, but I recognized Saney's voice.

"That's not gonna help you," she said.

Yet another whiff, then a heavy thud.

Mandingo down for the count, I figured.

Rebel said, "Kill his ass!"

"Be quiet!" said a cultured male voice; then, in a softer tone, "I knew this day would come, Kaj."

Cooge yanked me to my feet, keeping the knife at my throat, and we began backing toward the alcove.

"Keep away from me," he said.

"I met this interesting young woman in the room off the outer stair," said the newcomer. "And I convinced her that we should join forces. Didn't I tell you that your security was undermanned? You just weren't set up to handle a three-pronged attack."

By rolling my eyes, I was able to make him out. Short, dark-skinned, Mediterranean-looking. Turned out in a hooded black robe. He was stand-

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ing beside Saney near the desk. Rebel had joined them and was rummaging through the desk drawers.

"Let him go," Saney said.

We were, by my estimate, almost to the alcove. I kept hoping for some slackening of Cooge's grip, but he maintained it, continuing to drag me along. Then he turned me sideways, and I lost sight of the three standing by the desk.

"Don't," said the short, dark guy, apparently addressing Saney, because she started to object. He cut her off. "He'll be all right, I promise."

Cooge hauled me into the alcove, where the dead guard was lying in a puddle of congealing blood, and on into the jungle room. He kicked the door shut after us, fumbled with something metallic. The lock, I supposed. As we passed beneath the golden leaves, I heard a rustling overhead. At the same time Cooge's grip slackened—he must have heard it, too. I had long since realized that I couldn't let him drag me out onto the stairs, that he would kill me once we got clear, so I made my move. Twisting suddenly; slamming my elbow into his gut. I took a nasty slash on the back of the neck as I pulled free of him and I staggered away, wincing against the pain in my side. Cooge had gone to his knees. He had managed to hang onto the knife, but he didn't look in much better shape than I was. Gasping, pale, strings of hair hanging into his gray face. He regained his feet, clutching his stomach. I retreated toward the alcove, but I wasn't sure I could make it to the door. My ribs were on fire.

"Okay, man," Cooge said. "That's how you want to play it."

He pulled a silver tube out of a trouser pocket. A whistle. He held it up, showing it to me.

"Know what this is?" he asked.

Free of him, I felt good enough to crack wise again. "Lemme guess. It's your willie."

Cooge laughed. "Naw, it's way better'n that, man."

He was about to blow the whistle, when something big dropped out of the leaves overhead. An extremely horrible something, sufficiently horrible to make me cry out in fear. Like a demon out of some medieval fantasy. Bipedal. Humanoid—though just barely—and twice the size of a man. Loose, pallid skin like the skin on a body that's been trapped underwater for a while. And it had that drowned smell, too. Dank, old, rotting. Huge taloned hands, clawed feet, a complete set of both male and female genitalia. Gaunt, with knobbly legs and a caved-in stomach and sinewy arms. Stringy gray hair, and an elongated skullface. Its bulging eyes were oval in shape, like hard-boiled eggs with black spots of decay. Kind of a mutant Cooge. I recalled what the blond man had said about it being his child, his familiar. He didn't seem in the least afraid of it . . . yet he did seem surprised. He stared at the whistle, then at the thing. He pointed at me.

"Kill him," he said.

The thing emitted a glutinous croak that froze my blood. It made a gesture of angry frustration—or so I took it—waving its hands wildly in

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front of its face as if denying what it saw. The way it moved, fluid, yet at the same time strangely awkward and uncontrolled, as if unaccustomed to the gravity . . . it was fascinating to watch, like how the lifting of a cobra's head can fascinate. I was terrified, but I couldn't have run even if my ribs had been fine.

"Go on!" said Cooge, desperation entering his voice. "Kill him!"

The thing took a step toward Cooge and gave out with a louder croak. It ripped the air with a taloned hand, it shook its stringy gray mop, it dug up a clot of golden moss with its clawed toes. No doubt in my mind, the mother was pissed.

Cooge was frightened now. He retreated toward the door leading to the stairway, shouting at the thing, urging it to kill me. Inspired by his retreat, no longer quite so stupefied as I'd been, I backed toward the alcove. Maybe the door wasn't locked, maybe the others were trying to get to me.

"Kill him!" Cooge screamed. "Kill him!"

The thing's right arm appeared to telescope outward as it reached for Cooge. An enormous hand seized him by the waist, talons punching into his back and belly. Blood jetted forth. Cooge howled as he was swung aloft. He sliced at the thing's face with his knife, drawing a thin red line along its jaw.

I reached the door.

Locked.

I pounded on it, heard faint voices.

Standing beneath the crown of golden leaves, the black branches, like a nightmare in Eden, the thing was shaking Cooge, croaking and making little crooning noises, like it was angry but having fun at the same time. It started to caper about, stomping one foot, then the other, up and down, lifting its knees higher and higher, chewing up the moss with its claws . . . like some kind of nuthouse aerobics. Exercises To Do While Assaulting Your Victim. All the while it kept shaking Cooge. Strings of drool eeled between its lips. It gave forth with a tender, cooing gurgle. Then it opened its mouth wider than I would have thought possible and bit Cooge's head off at the neck. Blood fountained across its face. It stopped dancing and held perfectly still, as if considering the flavor of the morsel it had just snatched. Then it spat the head out, sending it bouncing and rolling across the moss, leaving a track of crimson streaks. It smashed the body against the ground, leaping up at the impact, a huge pale death monkey breaking a doll. It repeated the action again and again, until what was left of Cooge flopped bonelessly in its cruel gray hand. It held the body up to its eyes, inspecting its work, then heaved the whole sodden mess into a golden bush.

It turned to me and let out a croak. Shreds of skin clung to its crooked teeth.

It took a hopping step toward me.

I tried to run straight through the door, beating at it, hurling myself against it. My broken ribs were carving me up inside. A croak, closer at

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hand, and a wave of foetid odor. Something crunched under a heavy foot. I clawed at the edge of the door, screaming for help, and I was close to passing out again, dizzied by fear and pain, when it swung inward and somebody pulled me into the alcove. Even after Saney slammed the door shut, I kept on babbling, clawing at my rescuers, trying to warn them about what was out there. I doubted that any lousy door was going to stop it. But Saney didn't seem at all worried, and the dark-skinned man told me to just take it easy, then half-carried me into Cooge's office and made me lie down on one of the sofas. Rebel was sitting in an easy chair beside it; he had a cloth sack of booty on his lap.

"Hey, what'cha fuckin' . . ." I began.

The dark-skinned man put a finger to his lips. He turned to Saney and Rebel, and told them they were free to go. He wanted to talk with me, he said, he'd send me along later. They faded . . . literally. They just faded into gray, as did thereafter the entire office, the furniture and the dead bodies, their colors, everything growing faint and sketchy, and then merging with the grayness that was filling in around me and the dark-skinned man. I watched this process without freaking, too worn down to be frightened any longer. Finally all that remained of Cooge's sanctum was a sofa and an easy chair, floating in limbo. And Rebel's cloth sack, which was lying on the chair. The dark-skinned man tossed it to me and told me to hang onto it. I studied him. Dapper little prince. Handsome. Sharp black eyes. In the real world, I thought, he would be somebody special. Not a front man, but a mover and shaker.

"Who the fuck're you?" I asked, my sense of relief replaced by a new anxiety.

"That depends," he said. "I could be your best friend, I could be your great enemy."

He was totally at ease, smiling a little satisfied smile, and I knew who he was then. The man had to be a player, one of Cooge's Satanic adversaries. Nothing else could have saved us from my haphazard plan.

"So you're one of the black magic guys, huh?" I said, and then, trying to boost my spirits by cracking wise: "You get into killing chickens and speaking Latin backwards . . . all that crud?"

"That's one way of putting it." He sat in the easy chair and crossed his legs, then made a church and steeple with his hands. "It was a good effort, your little operation . . . though quite inexpert. Still, it made an excellent cover for my own operation. I'm in your debt."

"Somehow I doubt that."

He laughed—a polished, pleasant laugh that seemed a fixture of power.

"How'd you do it?" I asked.

"Interfere with your operation? That was simple enough, but you wouldn't understand. I've been watching you for some time. I knew you'd move against Cooge eventually, so I poisoned his well. One can never be absolutely sure of the effects one creates, but one of mine—at least in your scenario—was to induce a craving for Cooge's blood in his familiar.

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Despite the craving, it apparently wasn't much to his taste. He seemed bitterly disappointed."

He gave a diseased-sounding chuckle.

Oh boy, I thought, Peter Lorre could take lessons from this freak. But I forced a grin and gave a little chuckle myself.

"You really here, man?" I asked. "I mean what's happening back in New York? How's this working . . . you talkin' to me now? And what's all this gray shit?"

"It may be that I'll instruct you later," he said curtly. "For now be satisfied that you've survived." He sat opposite me in a chair. "Once you're back in New York, you'll find that Ainsley never left her apartment. She's none the wiser. She'll always love you." He patted my knee like, Good boy, good dog. "That took some doing on my part, let me tell you. You made quite a mess of that end of things."

I believed him, convinced by his commanding air, and I thought, Always, he could do "always" just like that. I hated him for it. "How you know 'bout Ainsley?"

He ignored the question. "I've had to sacrifice your friend."

"Rebel?"

"There had to be a patsy," he said. "He'll be killed in a gunfight with the police. They'll believe he acted in concert with those already dead. You won't be brought into it."

I felt bad about that . . . maybe I wasn't such a tough guy after all.

"Nor will Ainsley," he said. "Not unless you move against me. If you ever consider betraying me in the slightest degree, the *best* that can happen will be that I'll cause evidence to be released that'll implicate both of you in Cooge's death. The worst . . . well, I'll leave that to your imagination."

"Why you doin' all this, man? What's in it for you?"

"I admire your aggressiveness, your pragmatic outlook. And it would cost me a great deal of time and effort to recruit and train someone else. I want you to take over for Cooge. He was my . . . my subordinate, I suppose would be the appropriate term. He didn't know it, of course. The man was a fool. He was convinced that he was a solo act, that he was holding his own against people who'd devoted their lives to the Great Art. He never realized that I'd been using him all along. But to the matter at hand . . . I'll be requiring your assistance in operations similar to the one you attempted." He smiled again. "Similar, but more expert. As long as you follow my instructions, there'll be a minimum of risk."

I wasn't sure I believed that, but I didn't see I had an option; if I turned him down, he would destroy me with one of his operations. I kept my mouth shut.

"The sack there—" the dark skinned man pointed to it "—back in New York you'll discover that you've come into possession of various cassettes and papers. They contain information concerning a number of powerful men in the city. Details regarding graft, sexual perversions, and so forth."

"Blackmail?" I said. "Cooge was into blackmail?"

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The dark-skinned man studied me. "Does the prospect of being a blackmailer distress you?" Before I could answer, he went on, "I imagine you were expecting to change. Morally . . . spiritually. People always expect that when they become involved with the Great Art. That sort of inner evolution seems a corollary to the practice. But for the most part people only become *more* of what they are. You'll adapt. I'm certain of it. Just remember that the men whom you'll be blackmailing are only well-tailored sharks. Monsters. You should have no more respect for them than you've displayed for yourself. And as for the operations you'll perform on my behalf, keep in mind that similar operations with equally dire results are performed every day by politicians and bankers and stockbrokers. The difference is that your operations won't be as messy. If it'll make you feel any better, think of it like this—you won't be doing good works, but you'll be practicing a sort of sinful economy. Not so many unfortunate side-effects." He smacked the palms of his hands against his knees, signifying that he'd spoken his piece. "Hopefully you won't make Cooge's mistake. Hopefully you'll limit your reach."

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes. I was uncomfortable with him, daunted. I couldn't find a place to rest my eyes, and I was beginning to hate myself for what I knew would happen. This guy was going to own me just like heroin had owned me, and there wasn't a damn thing that I could do about it. Finally I said, "Mind if I ask ya somethin'?"

Another shit-eating grin. "I won't promise an answer."

"Cooge thought that the Devil and hell and everything, Skull City even, that it was just garbage, y'know. That it was just a primitive way of looking at . . . y'know, at possibility. At principles. Mathematical laws . . . like that."

There was a pause.

"And you want to know what I think?" said the dark-skinned man.

I said, "Yeah."

He mulled it over. "I suppose the best response would be to ask you a question." He fixed me with a grave look. "Does it really matter?"

His eyes bored into mine. They were black, shiny, like obsidian, and yet staring into them, I could see them flickering like black flames, I could see souls writhing in torment or fractions on a page, I could see reflection and depth, emptiness and fullness, light and dark. They were proof against duality, they were the myriad in one, and the only thing I understood for certain about them was the black fathoms of their intensity, their pure and single-minded devotion to the principles and materiality of a world I knew too well.

"Naw," I said, turning away and gazing down at my hands. "Naw, I don't guess it does."

He nodded, as if in agreement with something he saw dawning in my face. "Well," he said after a moment, coming to his feet. "Time for us to be going."

Unquestioning, I followed him. It was strange, walking across that gray emptiness and not fearing that I would fall . . . maybe I knew to

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my bones that I had already fallen to my final depth, found my true level. Knowledge, it seemed, was all around us. Literally. Possibility frozen into knowledge of palpable cause and effect. The result of the operation must somehow have pervaded me, for as we walked, as the outlines of a New York street faded in from the gray, like the rolling away of a fog, I understood that several months had passed, that Ainsley and I were living in a tower in the East Fifties, and that my alliance with the dark-skinned man had been formally consummated. The three of us were strolling on a cold, gray afternoon along Thirteenth toward Avenue C. Alphabet City. The area where not long before I had tempted death in shooting galleries and sixth floor walk-ups. The dark-skinned man was telling a comical story, and Ainsley was laughing in all the right places. We were friends, pals. Everybody was happy, everybody was successful. Yet nothing seemed right. I felt uncomfortable, as if I'd landed on a planet whose atmosphere and gravity were off by a degree from normal. Despite Ainsley's beautiful face, despite my feelings for her, I perceived her now as being flawed, vapid, and I wondered if my new boss had touched her in some mean way and extracted an ounce of essence. Wind sent cellophane litter bouncing and drifting in the gutters. A pile of rags with hands and feet was asleep behind a garbage can. Huddled in an entranceway across the street were two runny-nosed junkies; they were sharing a smoke, casting anxious glances along the street. Waiting for their connection, for the arrival of quick good dreams. A bag lady wandered by, muttering to the dead, to the wind, to God only knew what fragment of her lost sanity. In an alley, a pair of legs protruded from beneath a crumpled sheet of cardboard.

"Isn't that so, Larson?" said the dark-skinned man, clapping me on the shoulder, and I said, "Uh-huh."

"What's wrong, darling?" Ainsley asked, taking my arm and pressing softly against me.

"Nothing," I said. "Just thinkin', that's all."

"Too much thinking's a dangerous thing, Larson," the dark-skinned man said with great good humor. "Enjoy!"

Looking at him, I knew I would not limit my reach. Sooner or later I would try him. That was implicit in the relationship, just as it had been in my relationship with Cooge. But the inevitability of our confrontation didn't trouble me, nor did the possibility of defeat. I was spiritually winded by the abrupt transition between the violence of Skull City and this dead street, but that was not the cause of my distress. It was the knowing that bothered me, it was my awareness of the circumstance that had poisoned the moment and made of the dark-skinned man's exhortation—"Enjoy!"—a tremendous irony.

Back in the days when the wrong-heartedness of the world seemed a medium for outlawry and romantic despair, when even my own torment seemed an emblem of rebellion, and New York City had for me a numinous mystique that obscured its vileness . . . back then, life was an ocean that flowed about me, stimulating me with the variety of its cur-

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rents, too vast and complex ever to be understood. Now, gifted with the overview that comes with control, I understood it all too well. Evil, I realized, is not in essence wrong. Rather it is the knowledge of evil that wrongs us, it is the awareness of our sly pettiness and self-delusion that twists the merely evil into true complicity and guile. And once that transformation occurs we are thrown aloft from the rest of humanity, becoming strange birds that fly alone and burn with knowledge, like the dreaming stone eagles that gaze down on Wall Street with blind, grim eyes, or maybe like those odd winged things that cruise above the Jaddo. We know and we know, and not for a moment can we forget the base condition of the known . . . especially in New York, that most self-aware of evil habitations, where every day, encysted in decaying hives, we are forced to confront the pitiful results of our complicity, damned to think and see and feel, to cohabit with villains and monsters and men in suits with eyes that held no answers. I stared with something akin to longing at the junkies, the bag lady, and the homeless man twitching beneath his cardboard blanket. They seemed like angels who dwelled at the bottom of my sky. Cracked, frightened, damaged, in pain. Yet accomplished in their ignorance, capable of experiencing the surcease of thoughtlessness, the void emptiness of bottles and needles.

"Come on, Larson," said the dark-skinned man, fixing me with a warning look; I think he understood what I was feeling and was cautioning me to give in to the inevitable. "We're going to be late for the party."

Ainsley took my hand. "C'mon, baby," she said tenderly. "Let's get out of here."

I could tell that she thought she knew what I was feeling—a twinge of remorse over my past, some morbid resonance with the environment. But as we started uptown, heading for our life in the sky, our aerie of luxury and power, I wasn't thinking of the past or the pleasures that lay ahead or even of the problems I would be facing with the dark-skinned man. I was merely wishing that I could forgive myself for knowing, that I could be empty and drifting and high, that I could suffer a magical reversal and, no matter how dismal the consequences, once again inhabit the unexamined life here in this place of endless possibility, in the city so nice they named it twice, in the borough of sharks and towers. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Rama Redux

Rama II
By Arthur C. Clarke
Bantam, $18.95

One has mixed feelings about this spate of sequels to classics (using the terms loosely—SF is the only field I know that has classics less than twenty years old), usually beginning with why can't they leave well enough alone? It's too often a variation on the *Rocky XV* syndrome—why do something new when the public will more willingly buy one more variation on a known quantity, whatever the quality? But sometimes such a sequel might actually equal its predecessor(s), and one is glad the author picked up the idea again.

Rama II falls somewhere between the two extremes. Arthur C. Clarke's novel, *Rendezvous With Rama,* would seem the last book you'd want a sequel to. It's about an asteroid-sized starship that penetrates the solar system, swings around the sun, and goes off again into interstellar space, utterly ignoring Earth and the humans that go out to investigate it. They get into its huge, hollow interior, a world in itself, find an enormous number of mysteries with almost no solutions, and then leave. Part of the book's impact is its very incompleteness—it's like the world's longest shaggy dog story, and conveys a wonderful sense of the alien just because almost nothing on Rama makes human sense. And that Arthur Clarke was able to bring this off without boring or confusing the reader is why it has become a minor classic.

On the other hand, the way was left open for a sequel by the fact that the Ramans (who/whatever they are/were) compulsively did everything in threes. Therefore there had to be two more spaceships coming along. And, by golly, in *Rama II* another does indeed show up, about the end of the twenty-second century (some seventy years after the first). The world has undergone a severe economic crisis in the intervening period (partly due to the psychological effects of Rama I), and several years of chaos, but things are about back to where they were, and another team flies out to link to Rama II and explore (going on the majority assumption that this one will be a duplicate of the first).

But before we have the kicks of exploring another Rama, more than half the novel is devoted to the goings-on of the members of the

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exploratory expedition. Apparently psychological testing is not a strong point of this age, since this lot shouldn't be allowed aboard the Staten Island ferry without a keeper. What intrigue and skullduggery! The twelve consist of five astronauts, three military men, and four journalists. The military men come off by far as the sanest, though one is soon dispensed with. The real nasty is a glamorous Italian female journalist who dispenses sex and drugs in her attempts to get scoops and power, has two male members of the crew at each other's throats over her (one of *them* is done in fairly fast, also) and, worst of all, smokes cigarettes, which is how you can tell she's a villain right off. (Smoking cigarettes will soon be the equivalent of the black mustache in Victorian melodrama.) On the other hand, the putative heroine, Nicole de Jardins, is not only a trained astronaut (the book uses the Soviet "cosmonaut"), but an ex-Olympian who has had a child a while back by the current King Henry of England. (He provides her with a dossier on the backgrounds of the other crew members, which comes in handy.)

This querulous lot manage to get into Rama II, which at first glance seems very much like Rama I, but don't you believe it. One doesn't want to give away too much by revealing what does emerge (literally and figuratively), but it's even livelier (a clue) than the first go-round, particularly after Rama II suddenly turns and starts heading straight toward Earth (if one can use "straight toward" to describe intersecting orbits). The expedition is ordered to return, and Nicole is stranded aboard the alien world, thanks to the nefarious Italian lady.

This Rama is almost as enjoyable as the last one, once you get the dratted humans more or less out of the way. And if you think all mysteries are solved at the end, don't. Remember, Ramas come in threes (and there is even rumor of a *Rama IV* in the works).

Kilian Joy

Gryphon
By Crawford Kilian
Del Rey, $3.95 (paper)

"This is the strangest day I've ever been through. I try to please my mother by going to your birthday party, and gryphons invade, and my mother gets mad at me, and I decide to run away to space with you, and we get shot down, and now we're on a floating forest talking to wild molmacs in a bald eagle."

So says California Moran to her new lover, Alexander McIntosh, hero of Crawford Kilian's *Gryphon,* little knowing that stranger days are to come. Not only have the alien gryphons invaded, they've done so with a whole planet, which they've set up in Earth's orbit. (They have a thingummy that prevents gravitational interference, thank goodness.) To make matters worse, they've come to conquer as

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religious maniacs; they want humanity (and eventually the whole universe) to become part of "the Pattern."

The problem is that while humans have been enjoying the fruits of alien cultures for centuries, they've never met one face to face (except for home-grown examples they've made from instructions). This is because the "Net" of alien cultures has established contact through long-distance (*very* long distance) communication, and dumped all of their knowledge, in the form of the cosmic "Database," on us while taking everything of human knowledge that they wanted. Obviously this setup had not been conducive to any kind of war; now suddenly the gryphons, who had been tossed out of the Net a millennium ago, have become fervent religious proselytizers and invented an interstellar drive to boot.

What makes this novel different from all those other "the aliens are coming, the aliens are coming" novels is the downright peculiar culture Kilian has invented for his solar system humans. Earth has a population of a bare twenty million people, with another handful scattered across the other planets. The alien knowledge has first brought devastation and war, then, for the survivors, an unlimited life span and equally unlimited resources; the "molmacs" (molecular machines that are more or less sentient) can "grow" literally anything, as well as inhabiting the bodies of humans, maintaining health and happiness (?). The population keeps itself busy dueling, making love and doing desultory research, much of which consists of "diving" into the Databank, only a millionth part of which has been explored, and only a millionth part of *that* is understood. They can live on huge estates or "cloudcastles" (floating same) or in molmac-created bubbles in the chasms of Venus. The main characteristic of this culture is utter individuality—there is no government, and separateness is the key word. People being together is almost unheard of; even mutual sex is rare, and sleeping together (in the literal sense of the word) just isn't done.

Alexander is one of the few young people in this culture; most people have given up breeding. His life has been devoted to creating his own—er, spaceship is not *quite* the word. It's more of a planet-hopping estate, fashioned from a comet; its name is *Wuthering Heights,* the main computer is named Emily, and the housekeeper is Heathcliff, a black Labrador retriever. (Kilian is nothing if not baroque in his details). The aliens do indeed arrive on the day of his coming-of-age party (an almost unheard-of sort of function, but Alex's parents are very old fashioned), at which his major present is, by coincidence, a homegrown gryphon named Victor.

After guessing what the invading gryphons are up to, Alex feels a sudden and unexpected wave of

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concern for other people, and the absolutely unprecedented suspicion that individuals should cooperate and combine (even—gasp! —their personal molmacs) to fight the invasion.

Will Alex, Victor, California, and the disparate individualists of the solar system win out over the alien gryphons? Will *Wuthering Heights* alone be able to combat a planetful of religious maniacs? Finding out is a pleasure, and if the climax is a little too outrageous for total conviction, so what? Here is a future with a difference, and that's something to be joyous about these days.

Claustrophobic Eden

The Wall Around Eden
By Joan Slonczewski
William Morrow, $18.95

More alien invaders in Joan Slonczewski's *The Wall Around Eden,* these in a slightly mellower key. They are called "angelbees" and look like glowing airborne globes about the size of a basketball. They have been on earth since the day a nuclear war broke out, and are blamed by the few survivors of the war and the subsequent nuclear winter for having instigated the catastrophe by jamming the radar of both sides with illusory missile trails. They are also held responsible for the periodic firestorming of the upper atmosphere, bleeding away the ozone to keep the Earth dead.

What few survivors there are live in enclaves, domes of thickened air which seem to have been arbitrarily placed around various communities. The only city so surviving is Sydney, Australia; there are a pitifully few other communities, including the village of Gwynwood in Pennsylvania, where the novel takes place. In the center of each community is a hexagonal pylon from which emerge the angelbees, and on occasion a sort of knockout gas which can put a community to sleep when certain taboos have been broken—taboos which have been communicated by often oblique visions which appear in the pylons. (These are also often cautionary, warning of radioactive crops and such like.) Trade between the enclosed communities is allowed by what seems to be a sort of matter transmission; Gwynwood receives a newspaper from Sydney in this way.

Adolescent Isabel Garcia-Chase is a more or less one woman underground in Gwynwood, though resistance has been forbidden by the town council which is dominated—in a relaxed sort of way—by the majority of Quaker residents. The story follows her efforts to build a radio receiver and to find a way into the pylon, where she is convinced lies the answer to the various mysteries of earth's "occupation." Halfway through the novel, she does indeed figure out a way into the pylon, and she and her new husband venture in. Needless to say, there are more than a few surprises in store, which it would be unfair to reveal.

The Wall Around Eden is a nice

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little novel, which sounds condescending and isn't meant so. How many nice little novels are there around these days? It's a relief to get a post-holocaust, occupied-Earth story that isn't all violence and anarchy, concerning civilized people who are making the best of things. I do wish that Isabel had penetrated the pylon a little earlier; things get pretty claustrophobic in Gwynwood for the reader after 150 pages.

Alien Drop-Ins

Strange Invasion

By Michael Kandel
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Yet *more* invaders of Earth, and these are something else! The cover on Michael Kandel's *Strange Invasion* shows us a seemingly enormous starship, bristling with whatever it is that starships bristle with these days. The cover copy cites Philip K. Dick, Alfred Bester, J. G. Ballard, and Stanislaw Lem (whose work, according to a biographical note, Kandel has translated into English). While my guess is that this would send as many SF readers off in another direction as it would attract, all it really is trying to tell us, apparently, is that this is not a "realistic" science fiction novel. What it is is a jokey, off-the-wall fable with a satirical edge, and all this on the cover just might be loading a none-too-serious little novel with more portentous comparisons than it needs or can take. (The relevance of the picture, as you will see, is also questionable.)

Wally Griffith has just left a mental institution where he has been since age ten, due to ongoing delusions caused by a chronic chemical imbalance in his brain. He receives a series of odd communications (by telegram, talking watch, TV screen [Ernie on *Sesame Street*], talking squirrel, animated drawings on his scratch pad) which inform him that the Earth will soon be subject to a series of alien incursions, which while nonmilitary will have a negative effect on humanity. The aliens are in essence tourists, and tourists always have a demoralizing effect on natives, in this case sometimes to the point of cultural extinction. The communications are from someone (thing?) that indicates that it's a sort of cosmic conservationist that wants to save the Earth. And Wally has been chosen as its instrument because he's so used to outré manifestations that he'll be better able to cope with the bizarre life forms he'll encounter than would a normal person.

So Wally is given a helpful alien "peripheral" to provide backup information and translation help and left to save the world. The first wave of aliens arrives in the boondocks of Colombia; they look like ambulatory green gourds and want to do nothing but party, which inspires the natives to a wave of destructive pleasure seeking. Wally eventually gets rid of them with the help of some Marxist toucans. Then on to Omsk and the walking macramé sculptures, Akron and

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the mechanoids that look like file cabinets, Antarctica and the Lovecraftian polyps, and Ankara and the humanoids with horizontal Adam's apples.

Each threatens humanity with some sort of contagious psychological attitude, and it would spoil the fun to tell if Wally (still plagued with his own hallucinations such as pink bats) succeeds in saving the world. And the book *is* fun, and short enough, thank God, so that its off-the-wall creatures and events remain amusing.

WHICH World?

A Heroine of the World

By Tanith Lee

DAW, $4.50 (paper)

Tanith Lee's latest, *A Heroine of the World,* is an oddball novel, but then, of course, so many of Lee's books are oddball novels, most of them quite wonderful. This one, however, is even odder than most.

The world it's set in might be created or alternate, i.e., it's Earth-like, as are the flora and fauna, and the characters are human. But the names of the countries and gods don't quite match anything in our historical reality. The level of culture is, say, European seventeenth century—guns and cannons, but no Industrial Revolution as yet. The suspicion of an alternate Earth arises from the names of the gods, which are similar to those of fairly obscure pre-Christian deities. There's also a certain possible familiarity about the geography.

In this world, whichever world it may be, Lee has set a familiar idea—the adventures of the female survivor. The classic grandma of all these ladies is Thackeray's Becky Sharp *(Vanity Fair);* Scarlett and Amber come to mind, and fantasy has a superb example in Cija, Jane Gaskell's heroine who survived the most extraordinary ups and down in the five books of the Atlan series.

The comparison with the Atlan books fails, however, when it comes to worlds. Cija's was outrageously fantastic, with dinosaurs and unicorns around every corner. Lee's is almost determinedly mundane; again, the story, save for nomenclature, could be taking place during the Napoleonic wars.

The "Heroine of the World" here is one Aradia, thirteen years old (to begin with), daughter of a general of a southern kingdom. There is a war: Aradia is left with an aunt, is carried off by an enemy general in a retreat to his northern Empire, marries him, inherits his wealth and title, nearly becomes morganatic wife to the next Emperor, runs away in search of the traitor by whom she has had a miscarriage, finds him, gets involved in another war and is raped, imprisoned and nearly hung before being rescued by her true love. Phew!

However, Aradia is no Scarlett or Cija. She's an impossibly passive and not very bright girl—about the only thing she *does* is to run off in the middle of the book, and one watches her get into mess after

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mess with mounting impatience. This affects other factors, too. The complex political and military aspects of this civilization keep intruding, but since Aradia has almost no knowledge of them, and the story is told in the first person, the reader ends up knowing as little as she does.

Nevertheless, from what Aradia observes in her travels, Lee seems to have built a solidly realized world which simply deserves a much more knowledgeable and interesting heroine than the one she's given it.

In the Redshift

Redshift Rendezvous
By John E. Stith
Ace, $3.50

John E. Stith has veered slightly in *Redshift Rendezvous* from the science fictional mystery to the science fictional heist novel. In it, an interstellar passenger liner is hijacked by a gang of crooks to be used in making off with the untold wealth gathered on the planet of Xanahalla, a sort of religious retreat where terribly rich persons give up their wealth and live in simple luxury to practice meditation and such things (Xanahalla = Xanadu + Valhalla). The hero is the ship's first officer, Jason, who falls in love with the wife of the leader of the gang; she is an unwitting dupe, used by her criminal husband because she at one time lived on Xanahalla. Jason is forced to navigate the ship to Xanahalla, and by pluck, luck, and brawn, foils the crooks, discovers and reveals the planet's dreadful secret, and gets the girl.

This is a fairly standard scenario, but Stith gussies it up with some scientific decor that will make it a high-techie's delight. It seems that these interstellar ships travel in a hyperspace that comes in layers, while the ships themselves are built in levels, and the relativistic phenomena vary from layer to layer and level to level. (Keeping levels and layers straight is one of the perils for the reader.) For instance, in one layer the speed of light is about ten meters per second, thirty million times slower than normal, and sound and time itself are distorted as well. This results in all sorts of curious effects: everything seen and heard is (if only slightly) in the past; colors and clocks are totally unreliable; if you run, you cause a sonic boom, since you can exceed the speed of sound; and a huge ship can be delicately maneuvered "onto" the surface of a planet to connect with any point of space since it's in essence intangible.

These are only a few of the wildly eccentric physical phenomena that occur while in transit. Obviously, the most ordinary actions assume an Alice in Wonderland quality under these conditions, and extraordinary events, such as a hijacking and the subsequent adventures, become something else. The low-tech reader may get a little lost—all this is so complicated that even though Stith (through Jason)

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does a lot of explaining the physics get a bit thick—but the results are so intriguing that it's fun anyway.

Unfortunately, the story runs out of steam once the gang and their hostages get to the surface of Xanahalla, and into the huge temple where lays, buried in the floor, the booty. Part of the joy of the classic heist plot is seeing the scheme succeed, and then unravel due to unforeseen circumstances. Here the Xanahallans are not unprepared, and knock out everybody but hostage Jason. For some unstated reason, he doesn't run up to them and say, "Hey, I'm a hostage and these are the crooks," but decides to lurk about the Temple and see what's what. This peculiarly unexplained action is crucial to the rest of the plot, but it certainly strained my credulity. He discovers that Xanahalla is a huge con game; the shadowy figures that run it take many of the disciples and do unspeakably disgusting things to them in the subbasement. Leaving the gang to their fate, he grabs the lady friend (also brought along as a hostage guide), and hightails it back to the intangible ship, where he is followed by the chief Xanahallan villainess, who somehow knows he knows the planet's dreadful secret.

Several events in the windup are satisfyingly dependent on the bizarre shipboard environment—a villain shoots herself in the back with a laser because light bends on one of the ship's levels, for instance. But the resolution is pretty helter skelter, and I wish we'd stayed on the good ship *Redshift* with its crazy laws of physics instead of going ashore and getting involved with sadistic religious cults.

Stage Fright

The Parasite War
By Tim Sullivan
Avon, $3.50 (paper)

In stage one a microscopic spore, a virus, is loosed from its home world into space to find, whenever, other worlds with likely hosts. In stage two, having found a hospitable entity, it becomes parasitical, eventually devouring its host from inside and using its tissue to become a *colloid,* a shiny, slimy thing that then goes in search of other hosts, yum yum, to ingest. In stage three, it can remain in the entity, using it by controlling its neurological tissue without devouring it. Stage four . . . ?

These are obviously not nice people, particularly since their host of choice on Earth is humans. Tim Sullivan's *The Parasite War* begins in the very near future, three years after the first colloid has appeared, and civilization is already gone with the wind. There's no stopping the awful things, it seems (and they're only in stage two at this point). Survivor Alex Ward has had it with lurking in the sewers of what was Philadelphia (the colloids don't like water), and decides to make something of a last stand. Gathering other survivors, he makes a discovery—almost every-

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one who has not been infected has some sort of mental illness. Aha, a clue.

But then they find that the colloids have a stage three, and have already infiltrated their band. But there's another discovery by their resident microbiologist—infection can be beat if you take a mind-altering drug. What's more, it leaves a residue of mental powers, which are most strongly activated by two formerly infected people having sex together.

None of these discoveries are made while the survivor group is just sitting (or lying) around. There's lots of roaming the dangerous streets of ex-Philadelphia, fighting off colloids, colloid-infected zombies, and just plain crazies. And then all the colloids and hosts pick up and leave. Why? Where? You got it—stage four. The climactic battle between colloids and humans comes on Liberty Island in New York harbor, where the aliens are building—that's the only word for it—a sort of human/colloid half breed *thing* (stage four).

There are some questions lurking in the background of *The Parasite War* as to the colloids' *modus operandi,* and some logical gaps in general that will leave the reader a little dubious if s/he stops to think. But if it's just a speedy, nonstop-action story you want, Sullivan keeps things going fast enough so that there's no particular reason *to* stop and think.

Another Hundred

Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels

By David Pringle

Peter Bedrick Books, $8.95 (paper)

Here's yet another hundred best books book, and I can just hear the knowledgeable reader grumbling. Well might s/he ask why I spend time on books *about* books rather than the books themselves. For the most part I agree; there's so much science fiction and fantasy being published these days that the limited space a reviewer has, if s/he conceives of the review column as essentially a reader's service, should be devoted to the fiction itself.

On the other hand, the unfortunate truth is that many readers know little about the genre aside from what they see on the new releases shelf of their (usually) understocked chain store. This is not necessarily their fault, or even the fault of the chains (book sales space is at a premium). I remember an enormous hunger when I first began reading SF and fantasy to find out about books from the past. For this I had to rely on passing mentions in the letter columns of the magazines which were the only places such stuff was published. And even today there are precious few places to find out what *was* good as opposed to what *is* good. So, *knowledgeable* reader, don't begrudge a little space devoted to giving out hints to newcomers for guidebooks to matters you know all about.

Such a guidebook is David Prin-

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gle's *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels,* published as a companion to his *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels.* The new one, unfortunately, overlaps another recent publication, *Fantasy: The 100 Best Books* by Cawthorn and Moorcock. But a good half of the Cawthorn/Moorcook book is devoted to works published before 1946, which is where Pringle begins his definition of *modern.*

There is inevitably some duplication otherwise, but surprisingly little, considering, and I can quarrel with very few of the selections in either case, which shows what a rich vein of fantasy there is to be mined.

Pringle gives a brief précis of each novel, along with information as to where it's coming from in the field, and some bibliographic information (first edition, most recent edition, etc.) It's all informative and succinct, and for those who want to explore beyond the fields they know, a sure guide to some wonderful works (Robert Graves' *Seven Days In New Crete,* Alan Garner's *The Owl Service,* Thomas Burnett Swann's *Day of the Minotaur* among others). Of course, once you find out about them, then it's a matter of checking *Books in Print,* used book stores, and the local library, but the rewards are worth it. (Ironically, these various *100 Best* books themselves might be hard to find, since they are from various small publishing houses. But they *are* current, and can be ordered.)

Lite Fantasy

Gate of Darkness, Circle of Light

By Tanya Huff

DAW, $3.95 (paper)

In Tanya Huff's *Gate of Darkness, Circle of Light,* our world is a buffer zone between the Dark Court and the Light. When indigenous life developed here, barriers were raised to protect us, but Dark and Light love to interfere. And all sorts of wee people, the inbetween "gray folk," live here.

This none-too-original premise is the background for various goings-on in Toronto, where for some reason or other a Dark Adept has decided to break through and raise Hell—quite literally, since he's going to open a gateway on Midsummer's Eve and let in lots of the nasty Dark.

The protagonist of the story is a young woman named Rebecca, who is retarded. While she has to be reminded by lists provided by her social worker to do such things as tie her shoes over the weekend, almost every sentence out of her mouth is of a simple childlike charm, full of eternal verities and surprising insights. Boy, is she tiresome.

But she can See (that's with a capital S, note). When she finds the little man who lives in the tree outside her apartment house with a knife in his back, she enlists the aid of various friends: Roland, a disaffected street musician (seems to me we've had a lot of disaffected street musicians in fantasy lately) who says "Oh, shit!" a lot; a bag

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lady who fills Rebecca in about the Dark and the Light and all that; the aforementioned social worker; and an Adept of the Light (aka an angel) who comes in response to the call for help Rebecca's sent by way of a friendly ghost who lives on the campus of Toronto University. The angel arrives in the guise of a male blond bombshell who turns on everybody who sees him —*everybody.*

There's a lot of skirmishing with the Dark around Toronto, and eventually Rebecca, the social worker, and the bag lady turn into the triple goddess, invoked by Roland who is, of course, a Bard, and the Dark Adept is defeated by a self-sacrificing tom cat. Rebecca goes to the Court of Light with the Angel like Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Back a ways in time, authors seemed to be able to create characters that were good without being goody-goody. Maybe it's a sign of the times that characters who are supposed to represent the good these days so often turn out to be insufferable. Despite a voguish amount of sex and violence, *Gate of Darkness, Circle of Light* has an air of cuteness about it, and the people that fight for the Light (which in these circumstances should have been spelled Lite, with all its noncaloric implications), despite certain quirks (the bag lady smells of urine), made my teeth ache for the most part. I finished the novel wanting to go out and join the Dark ASAP.

Kipplers

Heads To The Storm

Created by David Drake and Sandra Miesel

Baen, $3.50 (paper)

"Do you like Kipling?"

"I don't know. I've never kippled."

That old joke is a favorite of mine, probably because I *have* Kippled since I was seven, when I discovered *The Jungle Books;* I am an unapologetic devotée of Rudyard's now, then and always. Those books are, of course, among the great fantasies; I'd guess most true fantasy aficionados were weaned on them, and, unlike so many "classics" that one was exposed to in childhood (*Gulliver's Travels,* for instance), they continue to deliver on that level.

Kipling is out of literary fashion now, as C.J. Cherryh suggests in the book to hand. But I'd guess he's also politically unfashionable, since he superficially represents the British colonial period that no one really wants to hear about these days, and particularly doesn't want to hear anything good about. And Kipling, within the bounds of his own time and place (as we all so easily tend to forget we all are), reflected the good of that time and place, sharing his excitement and joy at the alien and fantastic culture of India with those who couldn't travel there and who, of course, did not have film and television to transport them there vicariously. Kipling, with his incredibly sensuous and pictorial "you are there"

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prose, made up for the lack.

Therefore, let us Kipplers celebrate the publication of *Heads To the Storm,* "created by" David Drake and Sandra Miesel. It consists of stories by a distinguished list of SF and fantasy writers who have been influenced by Kipling, and for each story, a brief tribute *cum* introduction by that writer (with a couple of exceptions). The participants are the creators, Drake and Miesel, Gordon R. Dickson, Poul Anderson, C.J. Cherryh, Gene Wolfe, John Brunner, George R. R. Martin, Anne McCaffrey, Roger Zelazny, and Jerry Pournelle; there are also a story by Cordwainer Smith and a poem by Theodore Cogswell.

This sort of *hommage* is like a benefit concert, less to be reviewed than noted as an event. (A letter that came with the advance galleys says, ". . . . a project like this was not done for the money, but for love—and glory"—I don't know about the glory but it was obviously done for love.) Fellow Kipplers, we be one of blood, ye and I.

New Superman

The Divide

By Robert Charles Wilson
Doubleday, $19.95 (hard-cover), $8.95 (paper)

The "superman" theme hasn't had much done with it in the last few decades, though it provides the basis for some classics back a while (Weinbaum's *The New Adam* and, above all, Stapledon's *Odd John* come immediately to mind). Robert Charles Wilson tackles it in his new novel, *The Divide;* the results, I'm afraid, aren't classic.

John Shaw is an intellectual superman; his powers were developed during gestation in a '50s university program run by a Doctor Kyriakides. When funding for the program was withdrawn, the child John was placed in a foster home. In adolescence, he developed another personality, Benjamin, to mask his superiority. Now, a quarter of a century later, ill effects of the prenatal manipulation are developing. One symptom is that Benjamin has reappeared and is taking over. Kyriakides sends a graduate student, Susan Christopher, to Toronto where John is now living to persuade John to come back to the U.S. for treatment. The story is about what happens, with many flashbacks.

Trouble is, nothing much happens, despite Wilson's introduction of a violent element in the person of Roche, the slightly crazed brother of the woman John/Benjamin is living with. Roche seems to be in the story only to provide a physical confrontation at the climax, so that J/B can get hit on the head, which resolves everything. Wilson made an auspicious debut with *A Hidden Place,* in which not much happened but the people were interesting enough to keep you reading. Here the cast is pretty dull, even super John, whose superiority mostly manifests itself in penetrating looks, analyzing body language and an unbeatable chess game.

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At one point the abovementioned *Odd John* is mentioned as "a kind of bible" for John in adolescence, but then characterized as "English eccentric writing of the thirties . . . fuzzy-minded, uneven, sometimes silly." It's not clear whether that's John's later opinion or the author's. If the latter, maybe he'd better take another look. Stapledon, if nothing else, knew how to create a galaxy of riveting characters.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . There's a collection of short stories (and one nonfiction piece) from Roger Zelazny, titled *Frost and Fire* (Morrow, $16.95). . . . A sort of celebration is involved in *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction,* since it's billed as "a 40th anniversary anthology." Lot of good material to cull from there. The editor is, of course, Edward L. Ferman (St. Martin's, $18.95). . . . Another one-author collection is *Patterns,* fourteen stories by Pat Cadigan (Ursus Imprints, 5539 Jackson, Kansas City, MO 64130, $19.95). . . . Another celebratory collection is *Foundation's Friends,* assembled by Martin H. Greenberg on the occasion of Isaac Asimov's 50th anniversary as a published writer. A host of authors have contributed original stories, each laid in an Asimov universe (Tor, $19.95). . . . The second in the series of alternate-worlders' delights, overall titled *What Might Have Been,* is devoted to *Alternate Heroes.* Among the heroes are Albert Einstein, Joseph Stalin (!), Abraham Lincoln, and Genghis Khan (!!), or variations thereof. Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg edited (Bantam, $4.50). . . . That excellent big fat anthology called *The Year's Best Fantasy,* put together by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, has brought in its second annual collection (St. Martin's, $13.95, paper).

Reprints etc. . . . A reprint of a work that's been OP for some time (like perhaps several centuries) will give confirmed Arthurian addicts a real challenge. It's *The Crown,* by Heinrich von dem Türlin. It was written in the thirteenth century in the Bavarian-Austrian dialect, in 30,000 rhymed couplets (and claimed to be a translation of a French romance by Chrétien de Troyes); the hero is Sir Gawein (sic). The new edition is a prose translation by J. W. Thomas (University of Nebraska, $25.00).

Of slightly more recent vintage is *Earthblood* by Keith Laumer and Rosel George Brown. First published back in 1966, it's an interstellar romp that can hold its own with any such being published today (Baen, $2.95, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot. . . . Larry Niven and Stephen Barnes have come up with a sequel to *Dream Park.* It's called *The Barsoom Project* (quick, knowledgeable reader—identify Barsoom!) (Ace, $4.50, paper). . . . *The War Machine* is the third of the "Crisis of Empire" series. David

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Drake co-authored this one with Roger MacBride Allen (Baen, $3.95, paper).... A new report from the Amber front in *Knight of Shadows,* #9 in Zelazny's Amber series (Morrow, $16.95).... From the cold front, #3 in "The Winter of the World" series by Michael Scott Rohan, *The Hammer of the Sun* (Morrow, $19.95).... And meanwhile, back on Pern, there's *Renegades of Pern* by Anne McCaffrey (Del Rey, $19.95).

Science fiction non-fiction ... Divine Invasions is a life of Philip K. Dick by Lawrence Sutin (Crown, $25.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014.●

NEXT ISSUE

Hot new British writer **Ian McDonald** returns to these pages next month with our dazzling August cover story, "Toward Kilimanjaro." In this fast-paced and pyrotechnic tale, McDonald takes us to a future Africa that is being threatened by an ever-encroaching, unstoppably growing alien forest, seeded from the stars, that is sweeping toward Nairobi at a rate of one hundred meters per day... and takes us along on a strange pilgrimage into the heart of the alien jungle, to Kilimanjaro itself, to see if the seeds of love can survive the heat of transformation. **Alexander Jablokov** is also on hand for August, taking us deep into a very strange far future, one where decadent immortals change bodies as easily as we change our clothes, for an elegant and deadly pavane of identity and murder, in the vivid and evocative story of "The Death Artist." Then Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Harlan Ellison** brings us back to earth, figuratively speaking, with a snarling, angry new essay, "Xenogenesis," in which he vents forty years of rage against a certain uncivilized portion of the science fiction readership, writing with a passionate intensity that will leave you moved and shaken—and then documents his thesis with anecdotes and testimony from dozens of other writers as well. Without doubt this is the most controversial essay you will read in a science fiction magazine this year, outspoken and troubling enough to keep our Letter Column boiling over for months to come, we're sure!

ALSO IN AUGUST: new writer **Dafydd ab Hugh** makes a brilliant *IAsfm* debut with a hard-edged Post-Holocaust story that is "peopled" with a cast of characters unlike any you've ever met before, in the sure-to-be-controversial "The Coon Rolled Down and Ruptured His Larinks, A Squeezed Novel by Mr. Skunk"; **Terry Bisson,** author of the popular novel *Talking Man,* makes his *IAsfm* debut with the gentle, wry, whimsical, and funny story of how "Bears Discover Fire"; well-known British author **Keith Roberts,** author of *Pavane* and *The Chalk Giants,* makes his *IAsfm* debut with a bittersweet tale of mutual apprehension and discovery, in "Mrs. Byres and the Dragon"; and new writer **M. Shayne Bell** takes us to yet another future Africa, one in the grip of drought and increasing desertification, in the moving "Dry Niger." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 26, 1990.

COMING SOON: big new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Walter Jon Williams, Judith Moffett, R. Garcia y Robertson, Kim Stanley Robinson,** and others.

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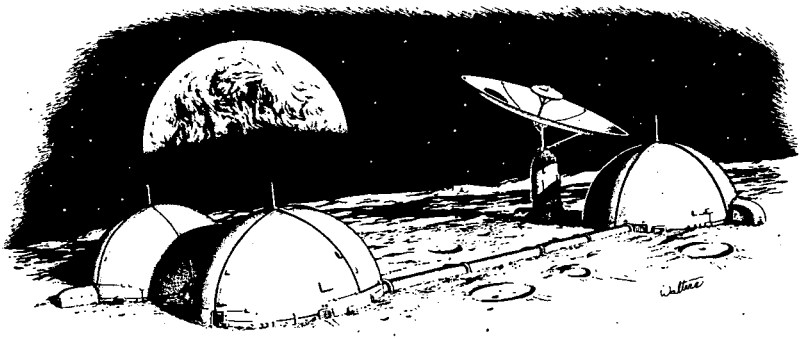

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

June is a popular time for con(vention)s overseas, while exams tend to limit the domestic activity level. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (again, say what you're asking about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

JUNE, 1990

1-3—**XCon.** For info, write: **Box 7, Milwaukee WI 53201.** Or call **(414) 223-3243 or 358-3212** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Milwaukee WI (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Christopher Stasheff, Wilson (Bob) Tucker, Joan Hanke-Woods, Richard Tucholka.

1-3—**NZ National Con.** Airport Hotel, Kilbirnie (near Wellington), New Zealand. Star Trek guests.

7-10—**DeepSouthCon. (404) 578-8461, (615) 698-7938.** Southern Inn, E. Ridge (near Chattanooga) TN.

8-10—**Ad Astra.** Howard Johnson's Airport, Toronto ON. Terry Pratchett, F. K. Freas, L. Stewart.

8-10—**ConCerto.** Holiday Inn, Cherry Hill NJ. "The East Coast Filk (SF folksinging) Con." K. Mar.

14-17—**SilCon, ul. Damrota 8, Post Office Box 602, Katowice 40-956, Poland.** By Silesian SF Club.

14-17—**PariCon. (602) 285-9859.** Wyndham Paradise Valley Resort, Scottsdale AZ. Duane, Snodgrass.

15-17—**SF and Fantasy Festival, Box 791089, New Orleans LA 70179. (504) 392-2455 or 885-5422.**

19-24—**Fantasy Meet, % Bentzen, Walckendorffs gt. 5, Bergen N-5012, Norway. Ph. 47 5 23 29 27.**

21-24—**MidWestCon, % Causgrove, 6828 Alpine Av. 4, Cincinnati OH 45236. (513) 984-1447.**

22-24—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105. (314) 421-2860.** The theme's the "Wild Cards" series.

28-July 1—**Origins, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 457-2490, 996-9129.** Gamer's WorldCon.

29-July 1—**InConJunction, Box 19776, Indianapolis IN 46219.** P. J. Farmer, the deCamps, Whelan.

29-July 1—**Ampersand, % Krsto Mazuranic, D. Zokalja 1, Samobor 41430, Yugoslavia.** In Zagreb.

29-July 1—**4th St. Fantasy Con, 4242 Minehaha Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55406. (612) 721-8800.**

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $85 to 7/15.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $75 to end of June.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $75 to 7/31/90.

AUGUST, 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $65.

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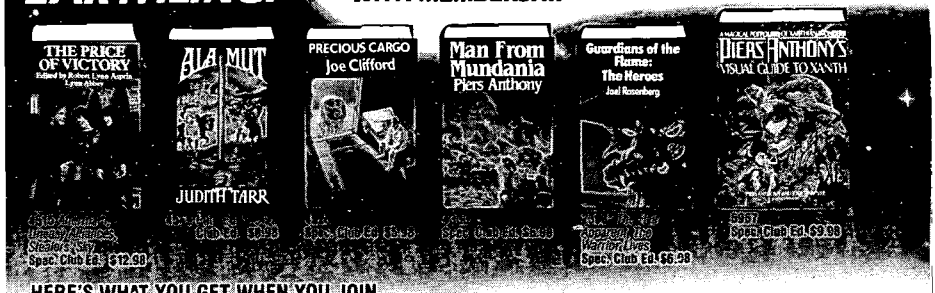

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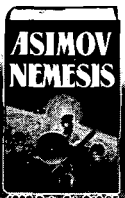

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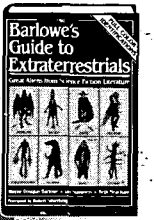

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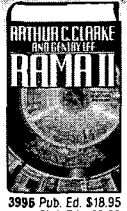

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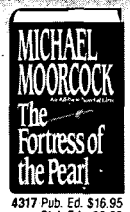

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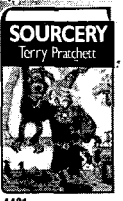

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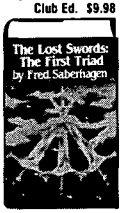

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